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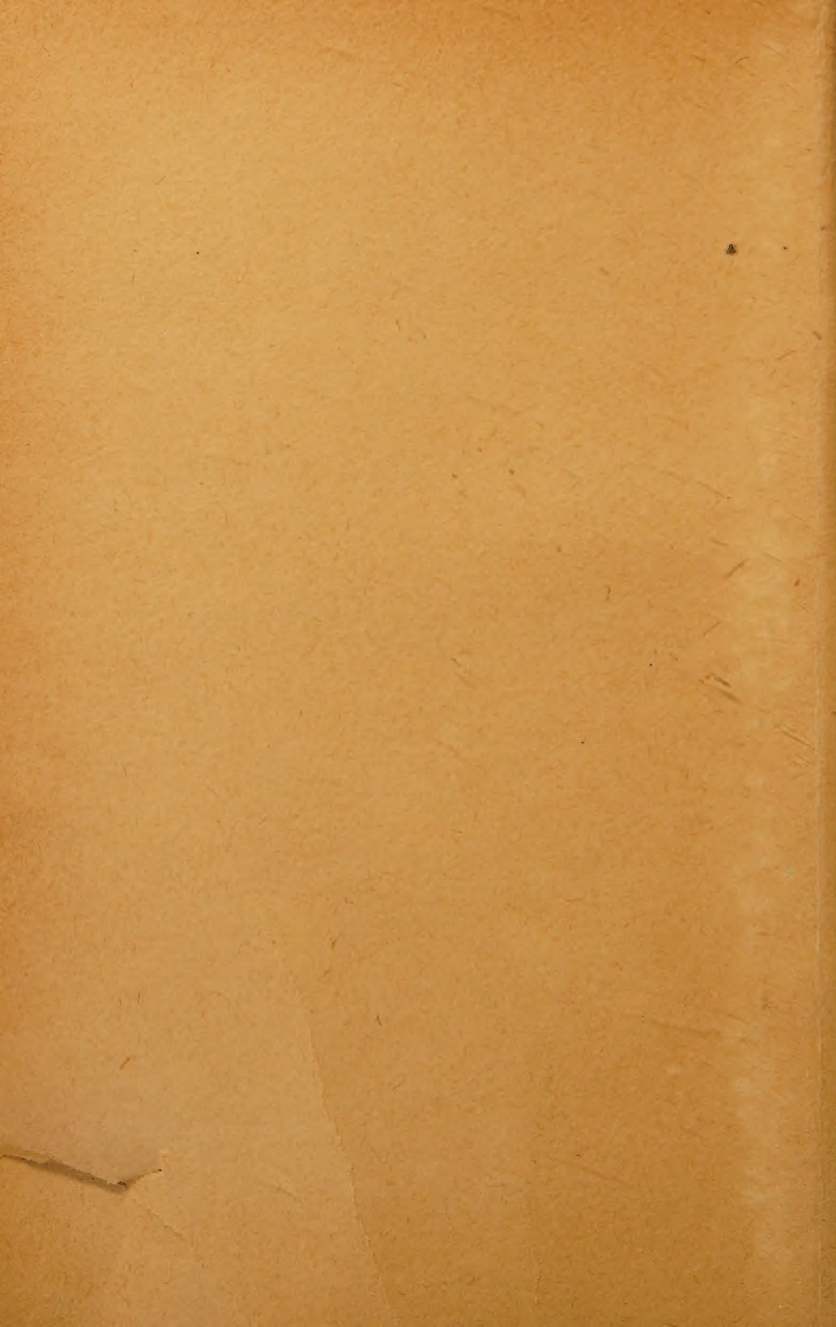
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HONOUR AGAINST ODDS



HONOUR AGAINST ODDS

BY
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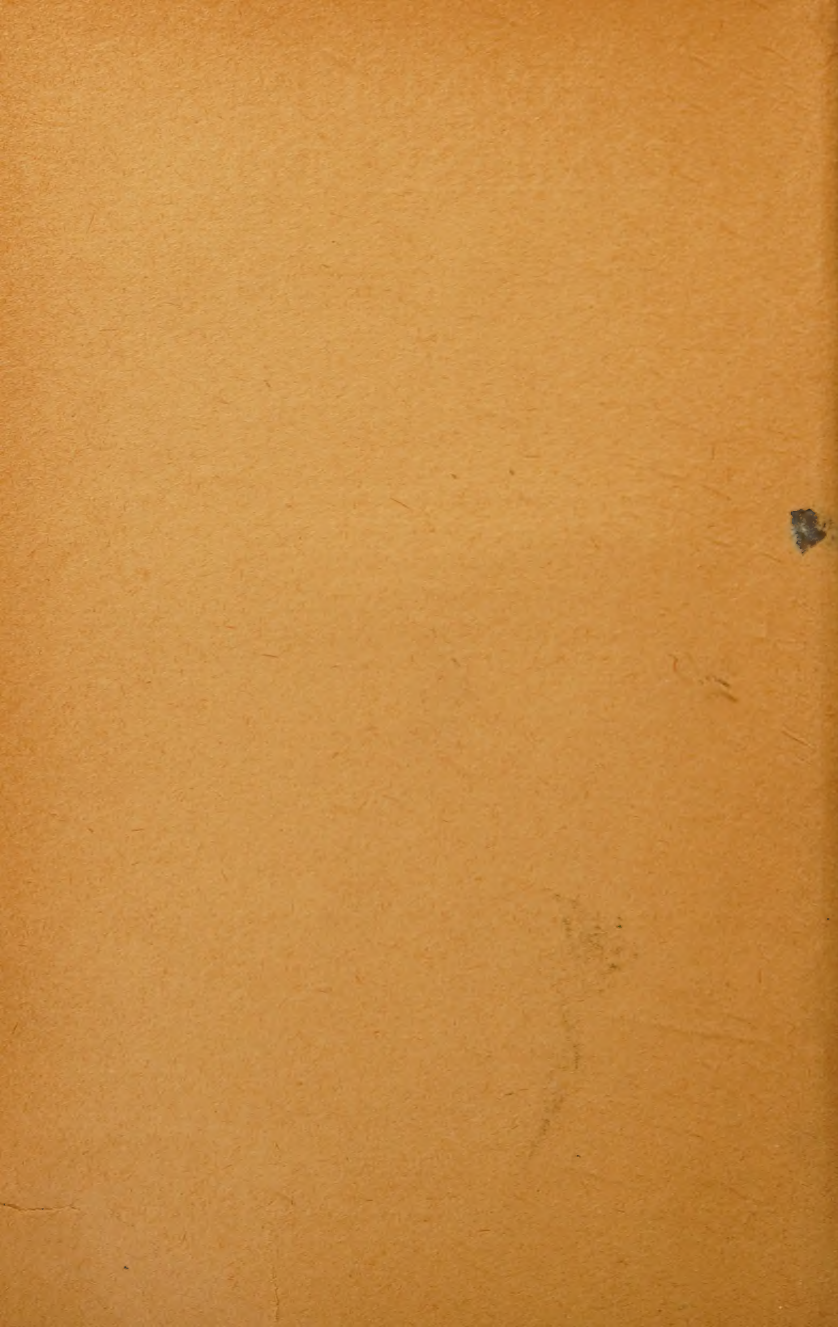
'THE SISTER CRUSOES,'

ETC., ETC.

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CHARLES H. KELLY

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HONOUR AGAINST ODDS

I

THE REBEL FAGS

‘A WORLD of words wouldn’t alter our decision,’ said Boyd in his loftiest manner, as he sat back in a low arm-chair stroking a slender ankle encased in rainbow-hued silk. ‘We can’t—we simply won’t give your house a match, and there’s an end to it.’

Laxton, his junior by a full year, shielded his eyes with one hand for a moment

‘You might put that sock out of sight,’ he observed a little wearily. ‘Very filberty and all that, don’t you know; but my eyes are troubling me from over-swotting—I don’t think—and they rather jib at violent colour-schemes. When I get into Burnett’s, possibly I’ll become one of the b-hoys myself, and challenge you in swanky socks and waistcoats.’

Boyd ignored the pleasantry, and came back to the subject of Laxton’s visit.

‘We’re about fed up with your idiotic challenges,’ he said, with an out-thrust chin and warning fore-finger.

‘More likely fed up with conceit,’ the younger boy corrected. ‘It would be a little putrid for Burnett’s to be dusted by Denstone’s, but——’

‘Do you imagine we’re afraid of you?’ asked Boyd, with an air of marked incredulity.

'For no other reason,' replied Laxton doggedly. 'If you thought you could put us through the mill, you'd jump at the opportunity, if only to help your shocking goal-average.'

The captain of the Fourth twisted his lips disdainfully

'That's our concern, and not yours,' he said 'If you've not sufficient brains to perceive the real reason why we refuse to meet you, I suppose I must put it into plain, blunt English.'

'Anything but French,' suggested Laxton blandly, as if ignorant that Boyd had endured an extra half-term in the Third on account of weakness in that tongue. 'Don't study my feelings. Fire away; I'm all attention.'

Boyd favoured him with a stare of withering contempt before answering:

'It's just this. Although Dr. Hedges in a weak moment practically agreed to abolish fagging, Denstone's still remains the disreputable Fags' hutch it ever was. You were one of the ringleaders in the revolt of the Fags; but if you think you are going to be recognized by Burnett's, you're jolly well mistaken. You're not on our visiting-list.'

'Tut! tut!' protested Laxton. 'You only got into the Fourth by the skin of your teeth. They're a scraggy, weak-kneed lot at the best, or they would never have elected you captain. They only kow-tow to you because you are well blessed with the "ready." On your real merits you'd be nowhere in the running.'

This plain speaking was gall to Boyd, but it was too near the truth for contradiction. He affected to tie a shoe-lace that needed no attention, and then stood up to intimate that the interview was at an end.

'Your objections are altogether piffle,' said Laxton as he, too, got on his feet. 'The game's the thing. Your footer record this season is enough to make your house cat blush with shame, and we shall continue to chip you until you consent to meet us.'

Boyd declined to enter into further argument, well knowing that the visitor was likely to get the better of it. It was a fact that Burnett's had done uncommonly badly, while the erstwhile Fags, happening to be a more than average hefty lot for their years, were abnormally keen on sports, and had swamped almost every third team on their match-list.

Laxton bade Boyd a frosty adieu, and betook himself to Denstone's to announce the abortive result of his mission.

The skipper of the Thirds was Donald Kerr, a brawny shock-headed young Scot, the last of a long line of athletic forbears. Forceful and masterful to a degree, he had infected all in his house with his own remarkable vim. Soccer was his special forte, and at centre-forward he was markedly able for his age. As a coach and guide he was simply incomparable, as testified by the Fags' match-table. But the outstanding feature of Denstone's was their absolute unanimity. No matter what was afoot, they were all of one mind, or, if there were differences of opinion, it was put to the vote, and then the minority sank their individual views and acted as one man.

On the other hand, Burnett's often was a house divided against itself. Conflicting interests constantly required adjustment. It was quite true that Boyd had gained the captaincy by rather dubious means that left a soreness with Newman, who had been overthrown. In scholarship and personal attributes

Newman was superior to Boyd; and if he had retained the leadership, Burnett's would have been a happier house and their footer record would have been less open to criticism.

The Fags listened in silence while Laxton retailed his conversation with Boyd. The continued refusal of a match was bad enough in itself, but the disdainful reflections on their house wore more holes in their long-suffering patience.

'Perhaps I'd better go and have a word with Boyd,' suggested Kerr, 'although after my last visit I vowed I'd never darken Burnett's door again until Denstone's chucks me out for good.'

'Leave it alone to-night,' advised Laxton. 'Half a dozen were going into Boyd's room just as I came out. They'd probably put you through the hoop and throw you downstairs.'

In moments of great mental stress Kerr often lapsed into his ancestral Gaelic.

'We winna sit down under sic insults!' he cried. 'We'll all go. Whit d'ye say? Them as isna feart follow me, an' we'll juist knock a few lumps off the peetifu' upstairs.'

Laxton deprecated any action that might lead to a plentiful crop of impots, but he was in a minority of one. The Fags were ready for mischief, and the avengers to the number of a score swept out of the house.

Outside Burnett's the Fags awaited under cover of the darkness for a favourable opportunity to gain the main staircase unobserved, and when the moment was ripe they stole up to the first floor like shadows.

Two minutes later Mr. Burnett thought his house had been struck by a howling tornado. There was a

tremendous racket immediately above his study, where he was engaged talking to Tom Barwell, captain of the school, and the idol of the Bramleigh boys almost without exception.

When Kerr and his satellites burst into Boyd's room, its seven or eight inmates were paralysed for a moment by the sheer audacity of the visitation. Only for a moment. No words were wasted. No quarter was asked. The Fourths were quite content for the Fags to have walked self-invited into trouble; and the juniors, fully alive to their advantage in numbers, entered the fray with whole-souled joy.

A lively *mêlée* ensued. Furniture was overturned; text-books hurtled across the room; couples came to grips; but if a Fag were getting worsted there was always a chum at a loose end for a moment to bear a hand.

Five minutes saw the beginning and the end of the strenuous encounter. When Mr. Burnett, Barwell, and a dozen Fourths reached Boyd's room, they found the door wedged from the inside. By the time the obstacle was removed the last of Kerr's avenging band was sliding down the backstair banister *en route* for his own wigwam.

Two of the rooms, Boyd's and the one adjoining, could not have looked worse if they had suffered a five-minutes' earthquake; and Boyd and his friends were in various stages of disrepair. A sleeve of Kerby's jacket had been pulled out literally by the roots; Pilditch was stroking a split lip; Hollier wondered whether the lump on the back of his head was really as big as it felt; more than one nose was exceedingly ruddy, and at least a couple of black eyes were in rapid fructuation.

Maurice Boyd appeared to have been in the very focus of the storm. He was an absolute wreck. Both ends of his collar had left their moorings, and a couple of gilt buttons of his figured waistcoat lay in the fender. He looked as if he had been drawn backward and forward through a hedge. He was only just recovering his breath after Kerr's relentless manipulation of a lemonade syphon. His shirt-front and waistcoat were sopping wet, and to match his dilapidated appearance he was in a state of rage and mortification difficult to describe.

Mr. Burnett stood viewing the wreckage with grimly pursed lips, as he listened to Boyd's account of the unexpected raid.

'Barwell, please go over to Denstone's and inquire into the meaning of this—this outrage,' almost spluttered the master. 'Obtain the names of the culprits and report to me.'

Mr. Burnett turned on his heel and strode off down the corridor, which gave Barwell an opportunity of a few words with the Fourths.

'Why don't you give the kids a match instead of putting on lordly airs that you can't keep up?' he asked.

Boyd flashed a look of resentment at the captain.

'We're not standing on our dignity for nothing,' he explained. 'It's the principle of the thing we are fighting for. You don't seem to understand that——'

'No, I'm shot if I do,' interrupted Barwell. 'Standing on your dignity in your case seems to me about as sensible as walking on eggs. Does you no good and makes no end of a mess. Of course, I'm judging solely by appearances,' he added, with a dry chuckle; 'but the principle you speak of is sadly in need of supporters who can hold up their end a little better.'

'Look here, Barwell,' put in Jenner warmly. 'It's partly owing to your easy-going rule that the Fags got out of hand. You don't see things in the right light, and——'

'Perhaps not,' interposed Barwell breezily. 'Your own eyes will be sufficient to occupy your attention during the next few days. By to-morrow they'll look like a couple of catherine-wheels.'

'Your pleasantry runs wide of the mark,' commenced Boyd severely.

'Other things run too,' the captain informed him promptly. 'For example, the colour in your amazingly brilliant waistcoat is dripping on to your knees.'

Boyd did not reply, but flung himself out of the room; and Barwell went off to interview the irrepressibles at Denstone's.

The Fags had come out of the rumpus almost scathless. Kerr had grazed a shin rather badly in stumbling over a fallen chair; Davidson had lost a tooth; and Tranter's left eye had stopped a Euclid which Laxton had aimed at Kerby.

The rebels were quite prepared for trouble, and every moment expected Mr. Burnett to put in an appearance; and great was their satisfaction to find that Barwell was his ambassador.

'Good-evening,' said Kerr amiably, motioning the captain to a chair that stood fairly well on three legs. 'Not often we're honoured. We're having quite a lot of weather for the time of year, but these east winds——'

'Didn't blow your crew into Burnett's,' interrupted Barwell. His attitude was coldly official, but he quite forgot to inflect his tone with magisterial acidity.

'Well, the wind plays queer tricks at times, and that's a fact,' observed Kerr quietly.

'Come off your perch, you impudent image,' said Barwell in a sterner voice. 'I'm here to represent Mr. Burnett, and——'

'We'd rather have your company for three minutes than old Burnett's for as many hours,' put in Kerr quickly. 'Really we're rather fond of you, and wish we had known you when you were younger. Old Niblett says you were a holy terror to the Fourths in your day, and——'

'Niblett's not in this scene,' Barwell assured him, mentally deciding to advise the old porter to be less loquaciously indiscreet. 'If you attempt to pull my leg for one instant longer, I'll put you across the table and baste you a lesson in manners.'

Kerr only meekly nodded his head. He recognized the danger-signal, and did not propose offending a friend in high quarters.

'I want the names of those who raided Boyd's room twenty minutes ago,' announced Barwell. He had his note-book open in readiness to jot them down.

Commencing with his own, the Fag leader slowly and thoughtfully called out ten names, and then came to a halt.

'Are those all?' asked Barwell suspiciously.

Some of the omitted raiders were about to add their own names, but their skipper contrived to warn them into silence

'You don't want old Burnett's blessings to fall on the just and unjust,' said Kerr evasively. 'If I've missed one, let him enjoy his luck.'

'Very well,' replied Barwell. 'If I'm not mistaken, Mr. Burnett will leave some of you precious little

time for pranks for some days to come. Good-night !'

Before the captain was out of the house some of the Fags were protesting that Kerr had engineered them out of their share of the consequences.

' Dinna get any sic nonsensical notion into your baby noddles,' the Scot advised them. ' We'll get ten ferocious impots, and the ten free ones will do their fair whack and halve the punishment for the others. Twiggy-vous? '

The next morning Kerr and his followers were treated to a stern lecture by Mr. Denstone ; but largely owing to the good offices of Barwell the punishment awarded at Mr. Burnett's instigation was much lighter than had been anticipated, and, with a double shift on the job, the impots were worked off in record time.

The raid by the Fags upon Burnett's marked a new era in the strained relationships between the two houses. Although the Thirds had keenly resented Burnett's lack of sympathy with their aspirations, there had hitherto been no actively open antagonism. But having tasted the sweets of victory in their first offensive venture, it was scarcely likely that Kerr and his merry men would be satisfied with resting upon their laurels.

The Christmas vacation was at hand, however, and the Fags were filled with pleasurable anticipations in which schemes against the peace of Burnett's had no place.

II

THE NEW BOY

It was the middle of Tuesday afternoon in the last week of January, and Bramleigh's day of awakening to a new term. Three-fourths of the boys had already presented themselves, and the Quad and cloisters and the houses generally resounded with the joyful reunion of friends and quips and cranks on every hand. The Fags in particular were in great form, making a special point of greeting the Fourths with sarcastic obsequiousness that rarely elicited more than a frigid stare.

Boyd and Draycott of the Fifth were sitting at a study window overlooking the Quad.

'I never thought that Bramleigh would knuckle under to these putrid radical ideas,' Boyd was saying disgustedly. 'It makes the school a sort of home for lost dogs, and——'

Draycott laughed aloud at his companion's exaggerated notions.

'Not a bit of it,' he interrupted. 'A scholarship boy is no lost dog; he's rather a prize pup, if you ask me. To tell you the truth, Somerset is by way of being a very decent chap. I met him and Barwell at Hipley Junction, and came on in the same compartment.'

Boyd sniffed his disbelief.

'I'm surprised you were in any hurry to make friends with the outsider,' he said. 'You'll not catch me hob-nobbing with him.'

'Perhaps you'll alter your tune when you see him,' suggested Draycott. 'I have an idea he'll not take kindly to being sat upon. He's a Third for the time being; but Barwell says that in one or two subjects he's remarkably well up, although he's only just fifteen.'

'If he's at Denstone's, that alone would settle my attitude towards him,' declared Boyd. 'I'll bet you a month's tuck I cut him dead straight away.'

'Except in your own house you'll find very few to follow suit,' said Draycott. 'The very fact that he comes down under Barwell's wing is all in his favour.'

'I'm scarcely surprised at anything Barwell does,' snorted Boyd; 'but I do think he might draw the line at approving the entrance of any snipe just because he's swotted and passed some piffling charity examination.'

Boyd's opinion was on the top note in irritation.

Draycott was rather an easy-going, generous soul, and certainly without an atom of snobbery in his composition. He was tired of the subject, but decided to relate all he had heard about the new scholar, although he doubted whether anything he could say would modify Boyd's very fixed opinions concerning undesirables in general, and Jack Somerset in particular.

'Somerset comes from Brookhurst in Middlesex, the village where Barwell's father is rector,' commenced Draycott. 'In fact, Mr. Barwell had a hand in coaching him for a scholarship at the local grammar school.'

'It's worse than I thought,' said Boyd. 'I suppose Somerset is just a clodhopping prodigy who—who——'

'Fiddlesticks!' ejaculated Draycott. 'His father

has been employed in the great aeroplane factory at Brookhurst. Being a 'Varsity man he was qualified to educate his two sons at home ; and the elder one he coached into Sandhurst, and he is now a subaltern in some regiment. I forget which. Unfortunately, Mr. Somerset lost the little money he possessed, and had a complete nervous breakdown. Consequently he snatched at the opportunity of a scholarship for the younger son as the only means of completing his education. Then the aeroplane company took a hand in matters ; they dispatched the father on a prolonged voyage round the world in the hope of restoring him to health, and made an addition to the scholarship so that young Somerset might come to Bramleigh instead of Brookhurst Grammar School. Now that's all I know about the new boy,' concluded Draycott, 'and you must judge for yourself.'

'By-the-by, I'm interested in Brookhurst myself,' said Boyd thoughtfully. 'My great-uncle has just settled down on a big estate there. Some day my brother Jerry and I will come in for all his money. Rather a godsend for us. Up to a few years ago the squire was as poor as a church mouse, but came into a huge fortune from a distant branch of the family. Until then he was a Fairbairn, my mother's maiden name ; but when the tin unexpectedly fell upon him, he had to change his name to Jocelyn.'

Draycott, spying a special chum just coming up from the station, betook himself to Henderson's to meet him ; while Pilditch joined Boyd to be regaled with the latest proof that Bramleigh was going to the dogs.

Meanwhile the boy under discussion was being convoyed round and about the school by Kerr and Laxton, who already liked Somerset immensely, apart

altogether from the special recommendation of Barwell.

'In Somerset you're getting a forward who wouldn't shape badly even in Sixth-form company,' the captain informed Kerr. 'He's fast and tricky, and can give and take bumps as they come. He's real hot stuff, and will do Denstone's a power of good.'

Kerr nodded his head, and his features broke into a broad grin.

'Poor old Burnett's!' he chuckled. 'They'll not half have the hump at our luck.'

'They'll not need to grizzle about it long,' Barwell informed him. 'Somerset will be in the Fourth by the end of the term unless I'm very much mistaken. He's a corker at modern languages, and mechanics in particular. I know what I'm talking about, for my governor is thoroughly acquainted with his attainments.'

The Fag skipper did not wax enthusiastic over this later information; he hoped that Barwell senior rated his protégé too highly, but he could rely on Tom Barwell's judgement in footer qualifications.

Somerset formed a very favourable opinion of his new school. The situation of Bramleigh delightfully combines the charms of the sea and countryside. The school stands on the edge of a picturesquely wooded valley along which winds a stream as far as Bramleigh bridge, where it takes a sudden turn inland, and finally reaches the sea five miles away. From the back of the school there is a gentle declivity to the little old-world fishing village from which the school takes its name.

Somerset viewed Bramleigh almost as a new world. At home he had been thrown very much upon his own resources, for in Brookhurst there were practically no

boys of his own age and station among whom to seek companions. The greater part of each day he had spent with his books, and for his leisure hours he had asked for nothing better than long talks at home or rambles with his father.

But Mr. Somerset had no notion of allowing his son to grow up a molly-coddle. He arranged for his regular attendance at the works gymnasium, which was provided for the apprentices, and permitted the boy to play with the second footer eleven. At work and at play Jack Somerset was thorough. He became a prime favourite with the gym. instructor, and profited accordingly; and learning his football in rather rough company gave him a vigorous style that was likely to tell in any ordinary school game.

Meals at Bramleigh were taken in 'hall' instead of in separate houses. On this reopening day tea was an informal and rather scrambling meal, for the roll was still short of not a few long-distance scholars, and, in fact, several of the staff were not yet in evidence.

It happened that Boyd first encountered Somerset at the swing-doors of a corridor on their way to tea. The Fourth stared the new boy up and down contemptuously, and allowed the door to swing in his face.

Somerset flushed uncomfortably, and wondered what he had done to deserve not only marked discourtesy, but the vindictive look that accompanied it.

Draycott happened to be in their rear and a witness of the incident. He plucked Somerset's sleeve, and whispered:

'Nothing for you to take to heart. Boyd is a bit of a bear when he likes, and is always getting fresh bees in his bonnet. You're a Denstonite, and for that alone in his eyes you deserve hanging.'

Somerset immediately felt better. He had heard of the feud, and had laughed at it ; but at close quarters he failed to see any humour in the situation. Nevertheless he thanked the Fiver for giving him a friendly tip, little knowing that Draycott could have told him still more to account for Boyd's hostility.

Draycott, indeed, hesitated for a moment whether he should not make a full disclosure ; but elected to mind his own business, as the new boy would soon find it out for himself, for Boyd was the last in the world to study anybody's feelings, and was not given to hide his dislikes under a bushel.

The explosion came sooner than Draycott expected. Later in the evening a crowd of boys had gone down to the tuck-shop to get something warm to drink, for the wind had veered to the north-east and was cold enough for snow.

When Boyd entered with half a dozen Fourths, he noticed Kerr, Laxton, and Somerset sitting near the fire sipping hot chocolate. It also occurred to him that not a single Fiver or Sixer was present to throw cold water upon the scheme that flashed into his mind. He whispered for a moment to Kerby and Nisbet, and then spoke out aloud, as if in vigorous protest against their opinions.

' I tell you it is so,' he exclaimed. ' There's a heap of correspondence about it in one of the papers. Scholarshipppers are out of their element in a school like ours. They are unable to enter into the social side of school life. What I say is——'

... ' Rot ! absolute rot !' interjected Laxton ' You can air your snobbery at Burnett's as much as you like, but we're not taking any with our refreshments '

'I'll express my views where I choose,' retorted Boyd hotly.

'We choose not to listen,' said Laxton with ominous calmness. 'One more verse out of the same chapter, and we shall have to debar ourselves of your charming company.'

'Birds of a feather,' sneered Boyd. 'Denstone's is a low-down house, whose dignity it was impossible to lower, so perhaps after all——'

The speaker had failed to notice that a dozen new arrivals were all Thirds. He recognized the fact the next breathless instant. Except Somerset, the Denstonites fell upon the self-elected apostle of caste, and literally frogmarched him out into the gathering gloom and flung him into a holly-bush.

To their credit be it said the few Fourths present had not approved of Boyd's very gratuitous offensiveness, and in their hearts were not sorry that they were too outnumbered to attempt a rescue.

Somerset, white almost to the lips, sat perfectly motionless, gazing into the heart of the fire. His emotions were too complex for complete analysis, but chiefly he was wondering whether Boyd had voiced the opinion of any considerable number of the Bramleighites. Fortunately for his peace of mind he had not long to remain in doubt upon the subject.

The triumphant removers bustled back into the room. Laxton came straight to the fireplace and rested his hand on the new boy's shoulder.

'Please don't take to heart what Boyd said,' he pleaded. 'He's a prig of the first water, and speaks only for himself. You can take it from me that Bramleigh as a whole takes a chap on his merits. That

is so, isn't it, boys?' he asked, with a look that included all present.

Newman was genuinely sorry that Boyd had so overstepped the limits of good taste, and begged Somerset to forget it; and the remaining Fourths showed that they were in complete agreement. As a matter of fact, everybody was glad that it was time to make a move, for in a few minutes they were all due indoors.

Before the supper-bell rang out Kerr ran over to Berry's, the Sixth house, and confided to Barwell what had taken place at the tuck-shop. He thought that in all probability the captain would read the Riot Act over Boyd.

'Don't worry about it,' Barwell advised him. 'I know Somerset better than you, and he'll shake down into his place by the end of the week. If it comes to an open tussle between Boyd and the new boy, snobbery will take a back seat.'

'Scarcely,' protested Kerr. 'Boyd's a full year older, nearly a stone heavier and fairly handy with his props.'

Barwell winked knowingly.

'Do you know who is a red-hot favourite for the amateur light-weight boxing championship?' he asked. 'If I tell you his name is Wilton Somerset, you can perhaps put two and two together.'

Enlightenment dawned in Kerr's eyes.

'I twig,' he exclaimed. 'You mean that Lieutenant Somerset hasn't neglected his younger brother's education. Oh, my aunt! If only it came off and I'm there to see!'

'Keep it dark,' Barwell warned him.

'Dark as the ninth plague,' chuckled Kerr. 'I

wouldn't spoil it for worlds. It's awfully good of you to give me the tip.'

The Fags had been looking forward to the Wednesday half to put Somerset through his paces, but, as it happened, it rained in torrents, and field sports were out of the question; and it was doubly aggravating that on Saturday the weather was still more villanous, even to the flooding of the football pitches.

On Monday there was trouble at Henderson's and Berry's. Influenza was rampant, the particular victims appearing to be the first footer eleven, of whom Barwell was almost the only one left fit to engage in the match with Plymington on Wednesday afternoon.

'Plymington are awtully weak this season; and if we cry off, they'll not put themselves out to give us another date,' grumbled Barwell to Carrington, his second in command. 'We haven't lost a match up to date; and if we could only put up a team to play a draw, I should be satisfied.'

In his extremity Barwell appealed to Boyd to scratch the second-team match with Hillchester and take on Plymington instead.

'With Bankier, Forrest, and myself to assist you, we ought to scramble home,' he said.

But Boyd would not entertain the proposition. He had heard that Hillchester's three best men were on the injured list, and there was a chance of piling up a good score against them, and thus give Burnett's goal average a much-required fillip.

Barwell took the refusal very quietly. He did not argue the point. He simply told Boyd exactly what sort of curmudgeon he considered him, and returned to Berry's to take counsel with Carrington.

No announcement of any kind was made. It was

generally supposed that the game with Plymington would be cried off; but Barwell kept his own counsel, although he had come to a decision that would cause no little stir.

Soon after midday on Wednesday Boyd's eleven set out for Hillchester, and five minutes later Kerr was summoned to Berry's.

'Take your team to Plymington and do your level best for Bramleigh,' said the big Sixer without preamble. 'I had thought that several of us might have stiffened you up, but we have decided to let you play entirely on your own.'

Kerr's face flushed, and an eager light shot into his eyes.

'You're not rotting me, are you?' he inquired hesitatingly. 'We'll jump at the chance if you really mean it. We couldn't hope to win, but we'd worry the beggars to death from start to finish.'

'That's all we want,' replied Barwell. 'If you escape with nothing worse than a two-goals' licking, we'll stand you a tip-top feed at the "tucker." Is it a bargain?'

At Denstone's the almost unbelievable news was received with delirious joy, and promptly every Fag was getting ready to catch the 1.15 train to Plymington.

Kerr was a little worried by the importance of the occasion, but was quite aware of the glorious uncertainty of football.

'We shall get no end of a dusting,' he confided to his team when they were safely on the way; 'but if we stick to 'em, there is no reason why they should make absolute guys of us. It's awfully sporting of Barwell to trust us, and we mustn't let him down badly even if Plymington half kill us.'

Jack Somerset was the most nervous of the party. He would have preferred to make his first appearance when there was less at stake. He, indeed, suggested to Kerr that it would be better to stick to his usual front string, since a new-comer might not fall quickly into their methods.

'To tell you the truth, the same idea occurred to me,' replied Kerr; 'but Barwell practically insisted upon your inclusion, and what he says goes with me. And besides, Tranter's got a groggy ankle, and that's why I'm playing you at outside left.'

Somerset regretted that he was not to play in his usual position at outside right; but he was determined to justify Barwell's belief in him if it were humanly possible—and the rest was on the knees of the gods.

Boyd's team and supporters returned from Hillchester in a most chastened mood, for their expected victory had crystallized into a defeat by the odd goal in five. When they reached the Quad they found high jinks in progress, and coloured fires were burning in front of Denstone's. They supposed that Barwell had landed an Oxford scholarship, or else Captain Hedges, the principal's son, had broken a flying record. Boyd interrogated the first boy within speaking distance, who happened to be little Tranter of the preparatory school, commonly called the 'Kindergarten.'

'The Fags, don't you know,' blurted out the youngster. 'Simply rippin'. Hooray!' He interjected a rousing yell. 'Hooray! Bully Fags! Eh, what?'

'Stop your bleating,' said Boyd, grasping him by the shoulder. 'What have the bounders done?'

'Played a draw of two goals with Plymington,'

piped Tranter deliriously. 'Denstone's the cock-house over Burnett's, and don't you forget. Hoo-hoo-bully-ray!'

The second eleven fought their way through the howling mob. Their one desire was to get indoors, there moodily to reflect upon the opportunity they had missed.

Strangely enough, after this one wild hour of exultation the Fags exhibited marvellous restraint, and neither by word nor gesture did they gloat over the chagrined Fourths.

Kerr was very wideawake, and quite anticipated that their spirited game at Plymington would bring its own assured reward. So it fell out on Monday, when Barwell spoke very pointedly to Boyd.

'In the fight for dignity and principle Burnett's is in the last ditch,' said the Sixer. 'The whole school looks to you to give the Fags a match. If you refuse, the First will certainly arrange a game with them. I'm offering you a last chance to climb down gracefully. Talk it over with your fellows, and send me your decision to-night.'

An hour later Barwell was perusing a note from Boyd announcing the willingness of Burnett's to meet the Fags on the following Saturday week.

And all Bramleigh promptly decided that they would not miss seeing the game for worlds.

III

SNOBBERY CATCHES COLD

JACK SOMERSET's first fortnight at Bramleigh, he was fain to confess, was one of the happiest in his life. He could scarcely credit that he had known the Fags so short a time, and was pleased to account himself a friend of every one of them. Sometimes, it was true, he wished they were a little keener on studies ; but he had made it perfectly clear to them that neither sport nor the constant rags against Burnett's could be allowed to interfere with his set purpose of working desperately hard and some day gaining a Whitworth scholarship.

Nor were Somerset's friendships confined to Denstone's. Draycott was markedly pleasant, and several other Fivers followed suit. The captain was more than ordinarily interested in him, if only because the Rev. Aubrey Barwell was Somerset's temporary guardian. But Somerset did not take advantage of this really great asset in his school life, quite content to stand on his own feet, but nevertheless heartened by the knowledge that when any special difficulty arose he could appeal to the big Sixer for counsel and advice.

Although he viewed it as a point of schoolboy honour to support the Fags in the feud with Burnett's, he regretted the positive ill-feeling with which Boyd and his special friends invested the everlasting wrangle. He was thoroughly even-tempered himself, and would never enter a quarrel if it could be avoided ; but if there must be a quarrel, he believed in giving an opponent as short a shrift as possible.

The only fly in Somerset's amber was the personal dislike publicly displayed by Boyd ; but he had too much sound common sense to allow any exhibition of spleen and bad manners to dishearten him, or to interfere with the long course of steady effort which he had marked out for himself at Bramleigh. He could only decide to give the ill-conditioned fellow as wide a berth as possible.

But an unexpected incident brought Boyd and his *bête noire* to grips. It happened at the close of afternoon school, when the two boys were crossing the little Quad in opposite directions. Boyd, with his nose in the air, was electing not to see the new Fag, when an apple, in an advanced stage of decay, landed on his forehead and brought him to an amazed standstill.

Tranter minor had just entered the Quad having been over to Denstone's for a pot of jam out of his brother's hamper. The youngster was too delighted to be able to repress a yell of glee at Boyd's sudden shock. The Fourth wheeled round, darted at the junior, and grabbed him by the ear.

'It was you, you little beast, was it?' he cried, giving the youngster's ear a twist, with perhaps a touch of extra viciousness when he perceived the impudent culprit was one of the Fag brood.

Tranter set up a howl, and the jam-jar shattered on the asphalt.

'I never did, Boyd,' protested the little victim. 'I'm sure I——'

'No lies,' interrupted the Fourth, nearly shaking his captive out of his jacket.

'He happens to be telling you the truth,' said Somerset, who had joined them with half a dozen quick steps. 'In any case you needn't munch him.'

Boyd faced Somerset with his eyes ablaze.

'It will pay you to mind your own business,' he said hotly.

For reply Somerset grasped Boyd's arm and gave it a twist that caused him to relinquish Tranter's ear.

The Fourth instantly was swept by a gust of ungovernable rage. He stepped forward and lashed out with his left. Somerset backed nimbly, and the blow fell short. In a twinkling Boyd was gripped by both shoulders and shaken backwards and forwards until his teeth chattered. Suddenly Somerset released his hold, and Boyd sat down with a thud.

For a moment the captain of the Fourth scarcely seemed to realize what had happened, and then with a howl of fury he sprang to his feet and literally threw himself at his foe. Up to that moment Somerset had been but the calm representative of imperturbable justice, but now the light of battle blazed in his eyes. He met Boyd's rush with a terribly straight left, and then with a swift upper-cut clipped him under the chin.

Boyd shook his head half dazedly. Little Tranter in his joy was dancing an impromptu hornpipe on the demolished jam-pot; and the Kindergarten windows above him framed a score of juveniles deliriously happy at unexpectedly being on the free list for so good a performance, and box-seats into the bargain.

The grinning spectators spurred Boyd on to his further undoing. He threw all caution to the winds, and again came to the attack, trusting that sheer impetuosity would make amends. He was speedily shocked into realization that it failed utterly to serve his purpose. Somerset was all over him, while he maintained a defence as impregnable as a brick wall.

Finally Boyd was again taken heavily on the chin, and collapsed in an ignominious heap.

'You've had enough,' said Somerset. 'If you keep on, I shall really hurt you. Your fighting is about on a par with your shocking manners. I hope for the credit of Burnett's that you're not the best that the house can put up.'

Boyd had not a word to say. The sarcasm hurt him quite as much as had Somerset's vigorous fists, and he was draining the cup of humiliation to the dregs. The jubilant infants would see to it that the fight lost nothing in the telling, and Denstone's in particular would make life almost unendurable. He could not help marvelling at Somerset's unruffled appearance and easy bearing. He carried not the merest mark of the contest. At the moment he was settling his cuffs, while he addressed Tranter minor.

'You scuttle off,' he advised. 'Pity you've ruined the jam. You've spread it on your feet instead of upon your bread.'

'I don't mind,' replied the smiling youngster. 'It was better than jam for a month to see Boyd get a lamming.'

Somerset turned to his discomfited opponent.

'Tranter told you the truth,' he said. 'He had no more to do with throwing the apple than I did. It came from a grinning image at one of the first-floor windows.'

Boyd heard the explanation, but vouchsafed neither look nor word in reply. He was anxious to leave the scene of his downfall, and promptly took his departure.

The news of Boyd's whopping was buzzed all over the school at the tea-tables; but the vanquished did

not put in an appearance, and the victor said that the matter was closed, and refused to discuss it.

Quite naturally, as soon as the meal was finished the Fourths hurried off to Burnett's to glean a first-hand account of the fracas. But Boyd refused to admit to his room even his particular friend Pidditch. He announced that he should attend a meeting at eight o'clock to select the team to meet Denstone's, but until that time begged to be excused. He was hoping that the lapse of a couple of hours, with the application of much warm water and various soothing unguents, would render a swollen and disfigured chin a trifle less noticeable.

When Boyd did show himself he perceived that his defeat at the hands of the new boy had dropped upon his friends like a bolt from the blue; and he promptly decided to make a statement that would choke off further reference to his discomfiture.

'Quite a mere mischance,' he explained. 'A missile of some kind had just struck me on the forehead. Somerset said it was an apple, but I believe it was a stone. Anyhow, I was half dazed, and could have been licked by the merest kid. Somerset just took full advantage of his opportunity. I've no wish to hear another word about it. You may rely upon it that I shall put up a chalk against the wretched Fag at the earliest opportunity.'

If the Fourths thought the explanation was transparently thin, they knew it would not mend matters to traverse it.

'You'll be able to get your own back on Saturday,' suggested Newman.

Boyd cast him a look of interrogation.

'I've heard Denstone's will play Somerset at outside

right,' said Newman, 'and that might suit your book.'

Boyd was undisguisedly glad to hear the news. He was Burnett's left back, and would not lack opportunities of taking it out of the new boy. As a matter of fact, it was not Boyd's fault that his house lost so many matches; he was a determined tackler, and in clearing was the acme of recklessness.

'Good!' he exclaimed. 'I'll see to it that no goals come from Denstone's right wing. It's odds on that Somerset will not show up at Sunday chapel—unless he comes in an ambulance. I feel better already,' he added. 'On Saturday Somerset will commence to learn things, and I shall be his teacher.'

Of course, over at Denstone's Somerset was in particularly high favour, for Tranter had got a glowing and exaggerated account of Boyd's licking from his brother; but the victor made it known that he would prefer the matter was not discussed.

But nothing could alter the fact that snobbery had caught a very severe cold. Somerset might refuse to gloat over the vanquished; but that did not prevent other Fags sending messages of condolence to Boyd, or pressing inquiries concerning his health that drove the Fourth almost distracted.

Somerset was looking forward to the next Wednesday half with some eagerness, for a practice hockey-matcy was on the programme, and the game was practically new to him.

But although he stripped for hockey, Somerset did not participate in the game. While on his way to the playing-pitch he discovered that Bramleigh possessed an altogether unexpected attraction. Suddenly he stood still in a listening attitude. His ears had caught

the faint 'gurr' of an aeroplane motor. The boy shaded his eyes with one hand and pointed up into the air a long way up-stream.

'Why, there's a machine very like a Bleriot monoplane,' he exclaimed enthusiastically 'I wonder where it has come from?'

'It belongs to Lieutenant Hedges,' replied one of his companions. 'He is the Hedgehog's son, you know. His aeroplane-shed is half a mile past the boat-house, where the valley is bare of trees. He's experimenting for the Government. You see Bramleigh is nice and quiet, and there are no crowds to bother him.'

'Lieutenant Hedges has got a boat-shed and a workshop down on the beach too,' said one of the party. 'Old Meakin, a retired coastguardsman, acts as watchman. I think he lives in the shed. Whatever is going on, the lieutenant keeps it mighty close. You get ordered away if you go anywhere near the break in the cliff where the shed is built.'

'Well, I'll give hockey a miss,' decided Somerset. 'I'm going to the flying-ground. My father is an aviator, only unfortunately his health broke down. I'd rather watch the Bleriot than get a crack with a stick, and perhaps spoil my game on Saturday.'

Half an hour later Somerset was standing near the aeroplane-shed watching the machine, now skimming about like a huge dragon-fly in search of prey. The lieutenant alighted within a few feet of the interested boy. He was about to tell him that he was upon forbidden ground, when Somerset's eyes suddenly narrowed.

'One of your skids is bent or fractured,' said the boy, before the lieutenant could address him. 'Perhaps

you know, but I thought I had better warn you, in case you suffered some damage when next starting or landing.'

'I'm extremely obliged to you,' replied the aviator. 'How came you to know anything about aeroplanes? You're evidently a Bramleighite, but I don't recollect having noticed you before.'

'Only joined this term, sir,' said Somerset. 'I come from Brookhurst, where my father was occupied a great deal in aviation.'

Lieutenant Hedges was interested in the bright-faced, curly-headed schoolboy whose timely warning had most likely saved him from an irritating if not dangerous accident.

'Have you ever been up in a machine?' he asked.

'Frequently, sir,' replied Somerset. 'I've driven a Bleriot several times, too, under father's directions.'

'Would you like to come with me?' inquired the lieutenant. 'I'm going to take one more flight.'

The boy's face was sufficient answer, even before he voiced his willingness and thanks.

When the faulty skid had been remedied, the keen-faced, alert aviator took his seat, and Somerset climbed up behind him. Bird-like the machine rose in graceful circles until a considerable altitude had been attained, when Lieutenant Hedges set his course across country in a line with Bramleigh playing-fields, where his near approach put a temporary stop to the games.

Burnett's were having a loose football practice, the forwards against the defence.

'Didn't know that Lieutenant Hedges had returned home,' exclaimed Boyd. 'He's got a passenger. Wonder who he is? Lucky beggar in any case.'

'He's dropping something,' cried Pilditch excitedly.

Some of the boys were racing to secure the object even as it fell. Boyd actually caught it before it reached the ground.

'Well caught, sir!' resounded from all sides as the gratified boy grasped his prize.

'It's a Bramleigh cap,' said Pilditch wonderingly.

Boyd looked at the customary name-label inside. Instantly his face clouded with angry mortification. His delight at his expert catch was shattered to smithereens. He dropped the cap as if it had burnt him.

Jenner snatched it up.

'It's a licker,' he said, almost in a whisper. 'Why—why, it's Somerset's. He's the lucky bargee.'

Boyd did not need the information. The football lay only a few feet away. He suddenly kicked it viciously into goal. Kerby, taken by surprise, had no time for thought. Instead of ducking to give such a red-hot shot a wide berth, he fisted it desperately—and was sorry. For a moment he thought he had smashed his wrist, but examination proved that it was only a broken finger.

It was a calamity all the same for Burnett's. Kerby was the only boy in the house who could keep goal for nuts, and he certainly would not occupy his usual place between the sticks on Saturday.

'You've done something with your beastly temper,' grumbled Jenner to Boyd. 'You've mussed us up completely. Simply idiotic, I call it. You seem to have got Somerset on your nerves——'

'As well as on his chin and several other places,' supplemented Kerby, with a spitefulness that was excusable under the circumstances.

IV

FAIR MEANS OR FOUL

THE Fags' match with the Fourth was viewed by the whole school as the tit-bit of the season. Burnett's had been fairly confident their extra weight and vigorous use of it would carry them to victory, but the loss of Kerby was a handicap not to be ignored lightly.

Really at this juncture Burnett's was far from a happy family, and matters were never particularly smooth at the best of times. The elevation of Boyd to the captaincy had not proved a success, for Newman still retained considerable influence, and frequently there were divisions of opinion leading to acrimonious discussions that at any time might result in an irremediable split.

For the nonce, however, Burnett's had their backs to the wall, and were united in the desire to teach the impudent Fags a much-needed lesson. Denstone's expressed themselves confident of nothing, only hoping that pluck and dogged pertinacity would tell their tale.

Saturday afternoon came bright and fair, and the two teams faced each other, with Kerr kicking off in the hush that waited upon Barwell's whistle.

Interest was centred upon the meeting of Burnett's left back and Denstone's new flier, for it was common knowledge that Boyd had vowed to smash up Somerset without ceremony.

Shortly Somerset secured the ball, tricking the half-back and racing for goal, while the back shot forward to intercept him. But Boyd intercepted nothing ! Somerset stopped the ball dead, unexpectedly popped it between Boyd's legs, and raced round him to re-secure it. An instant later he let fly. It was fortunate for Nisbet in goal that the ball struck the post and rebounded into play. The shot deserved a better fate, but it was a taste of quality that mightily pleased Denstone's supporters.

Again and again Kerr led his men on in a straight line, but Burnett's defenders were playing with unusual vigour and crispness. Somerset was certainly the best forward on the field, and as Laxton and he got to understand each other's play, Boyd began to experience some very anxious moments.

Just upon the verge of half-time Burnett's forced a corner. In the course of a warm scrimmage the ball came to Dennis, who scored with an oblique shot that gave Davidson no chance.

Half-time ! Burnett's one up ! They would now have the wind in their favour, and would certainly add to their score.

The game recommenced. For a quarter of an hour it was a ding-dong struggle. Each goal was threatened in turn ; twice Somerset nearly got through, and upon each occasion he grassed Boyd in the course of the effort. The result was that the latter lost his temper and his head. Once he hacked the forward badly, and a little later, when hard pressed, he deliberately tripped his nimble opponent when he was shooting at only five yards.

' Penalty ! ' yelled the spectators. Barwell not only awarded it instantly, but gravely cautioned the back

concerning the tactics he was adopting, intimating that a repetition might leave Burnett's with only ten men.

Kerr took the kick. It was a rasping shot, but Nisbet rose to the occasion, and fielded the ball splendidly. It was, however, too hot to hold, and he dropped it. Before he could recover it Somerset rushed in and banged the leather into the rigging.

'For goodness' sake, Boyd, keep your head, and don't give another goal away,' said Jenner to his partner irritably.

It was a quite justifiable remark; but it did nothing to soothe Boyd's feelings, who commenced to play wilder than ever. Whenever Somerset came along the wing he went for him full tilt, bent upon taking the man. It was a game that well suited the right winger with his tricky command over the ball. Almost invariably he drew Boyd out and then smartly passed the ball to Laxton, who in turn made tracks for goal, or slung it over to Kerr, who generally knew what to do with it.

With only fifteen minutes to go Burnett's were in difficulties. Several of them could stand the pace no longer, and were practically anxious for the whistle to blow, quite satisfied to have achieved a draw. On the other hand, the Denstone forwards appeared almost as fresh as paint. Quick to seize upon an advantage, they commenced a series of hot assaults upon Boyd and company, who were at their wits' end to stave off the continual danger.

Five minutes passed, and Burnett's fell back with the intention of playing out time. It availed them nothing, for Somerset shortly centred, and Kerr literally punted the ball into the net.

Denstone's, two; Burnett's, one!

Barwell was keeping an eye on his watch, when Kerr had another pot that Nisbet was glad to get rid of at the expense of a corner. It proved to be only the postponement of trouble. Laxton from the corner dropped the ball well in front of goal. Boyd jumped up to head it out just as Somerset came in with a wet sail. Their heads met with a crash: Somerset's was not only the harder, but he headed the ball past Nisbet into the bargain.

The whistle went. Burnett's were handsomely beaten, and Boyd was sitting at the foot of a goal-post wondering that there were so many stars in the universe as he had just seen.

Denstone's promptly went mad. They shouldered their heroes and bore them off to the tuck-shop to treat them to any indigestible delicacy that their vagrant tastes fancied. Burnett's gave the 'tucker' a wide berth, judging it would not prove a spot conducive to wounded pride. They were bottom dogs, and knew it!

Later in the evening from their windows Boyd and his despondent crowd were afforded a fine view of the bonfire in Denstone's garden, around which begrimed attendant demons danced with noisy glee. It was not until the next morning that the vanquished discovered that some of the fuel at least had been looted from their own premises. At any rate, inquiries were being made for a couple of rabbit-hutches and a dog kennel that had disappeared into thin air—or smoke.

By no stretch of imagination could Boyd persuade himself that he had enjoyed a festive week; but he could easily convince himself that the new Fag was to blame for his misfortunes. Without counting being flung out of the 'tucker,' Somerset had nearly put his chin in a sling, and had now provided him with the

loveliest pair of black eyes that Bramleigh had seen for many a long day.

‘I’ll get square with him,’ Boyd murmured as he gazed at himself in a glass. ‘My turn will come, and then I’ll make it hot for him.’

On Sunday Boyd pleaded headache, and obtained permission to keep his room. Pilditch, who occupied the same bedroom, was the only one permitted a view of the optical adornments with which Somerset had favoured Burnett’s skipper in the scoring of that last desperate goal.

‘You’re really the best picture I’ve seen out of a ha’penny comic,’ observed Pilditch

‘Oh, shut up!’ snorted Boyd inelegantly. ‘I was injured in trying to save a goal, which was not what you would risk in scoring one.’

‘Now you’re trying to be nasty,’ was the reply. ‘I worked like a nigger for the full ninety minutes, but had shocking luck. I didn’t let my side down by giving a penalty-goal away. You were going to put Somerset in hospital, whereas the boot is on the other foot, and he has made a perfect guy of you.’

This frank outburst from a friend reduced Boyd to moody pulp. It was indicative of what he might expect from other quarters. He buried his head in his pillow, and deigned no other remark, while Pilditch completed his dressing.

On Monday morning, however, Pilditch was more sympathetic. For the credit of the house it was necessary that the captain should be made as presentable as possible to the gaze of a scornful and unfeeling world.

‘Great Scott! I’ve got an idea, Boyd,’ he exclaimed. ‘It’s a knocker; it’s good enough to copyright. I’ve

got a box of paints. In half a twink I can fake up your eyes as if nothing were the matter with them.'

Boyd considered the suggestion for a moment rather suspiciously; but he could see that Pilditch was serious and anxious to serve him. He viewed himself afresh in the mirror disapprovingly, and was persuaded that the experiment could not possibly make him look worse.

'It you think that——' he commenced.

'I'm sure of it,' interrupted Pilditch, making for the door. 'I'll be back in a jiffy and touch you up a treat.'

Twenty minutes later Boyd confessed that his friend had achieved a most artistic success. The ugly black marks had quite disappeared, and at a distance or in a poor light it would be impossible for anybody to perceive anything out of the ordinary.

When Boyd went into chapel he could see that the Denstonites were frankly surprised and equally disappointed. From where they sat the captain of the second eleven showed no traces of the fray.

'They're too surprised for words,' whispered Pilditch delightedly. 'It's a score to me. I'll set up as a beauty specialist, and make piles of tin.'

Boyd grimly smiled his agreement.

Morning school was not an hour old when the painted Fourth began to be afflicted with doubts. By that time the paint was dry; not only had it dried his flesh until it felt as hard as a bone, but it itched intolerably. Every now and then he made horrible grimaces, and felt that he should like to slay the artist.

'What's the matter with you?' inquired Pilditch. 'Half of your face looks as if it wanted to laugh, while the other half is taking physic.'

'Your fault,' groaned the sufferer. 'It's your beastly paint. Unless I get it off I shall go stark, staring dotty. I was an ass to let you tinker me with your idiotic cleverness.'

Pilditch eyed the victim reprovingly.

'All the thanks I get for transforming you from a freak into a respectable member of society,' he said sadly. 'Get the stuff off and give the show away. If you can't put up with a little inconvenience——'

'It's easy for you to talk,' growled Boyd. 'You haven't got your eyes painted——'

'Nor blacked either,' interposed Pilditch huffily, as he turned his back on his handiwork.

Boyd was in positive purgatory until the midday break in the lessons, when he hurried off to his room and dabbed Pilditch's misguided effort with hot water. The removal of the paint brought ease in its wake, but exposed an altogether unexpected result. Possibly the paint contained an irritant of some kind, which had brought out various startling prismatic effects.

'Geewillikins!' exclaimed Jenner, who entered the room with a message. 'I thought your eyes were practically well. Why, I'm blessed! They look like a painter's palette in a fit.'

Jenner beat a hasty retreat. It was a wise move on his part, for Boyd would certainly have drenched him with the hot water.

In the afternoon the whole school was bubbling over with amusement, and Boyd and Pilditch were not on speaking terms.

When tea was over Boyd retired to his room, determined to deny himself to everybody. He was left in peace until half-past six, when somebody sought admittance. But the recluse was rigorously sporting

the oak, and ignored the increasing attack upon his door, until Nisbet spoke through the keyhole.

‘Don’t play the goat, Boyd,’ he said. ‘There’s a railway porter inquiring for you. Says he’s got a message. He’s mighty mysterious over it, but says it is frantically urgent.’

‘It’s some rag of Denstone’s,’ replied Boyd. ‘They can try it on some one else.’

‘I’m quite sure it’s nothing of the sort,’ urged Nisbet.

Boyd reflected for a moment.

‘Well, I’m not coming down,’ he decided. ‘Send the chap up here. If it’s what I expect, I shall kick him downstairs.’

The porter duly appeared. He whispered to Boyd only for a moment, and evidently his message was no joke.

‘All right,’ said the astonished Fourth. ‘I’ll follow you in a few moments.’

Boyd laced his shoes with furious haste. He donned a long overcoat, turned up the collar, pulled a cap well down over his eyes, and then raced off to the railway-station, catching up the porter at the entrance.

‘She’s in the waiting-room,’ the man said; and thither Boyd darted.

‘Mother!’ cried the boy amazedly.

For a moment Mrs. Boyd was too astonished to greet him. She was a cold, almost forbidding woman, and not demonstrative in her affections. She was plainly horrified at her son’s battered appearance.

‘You’ve been fighting,’ she said severely.

‘No, footer,’ explained Boyd. ‘It was an accident. A new chap, Somerset, barged into me, and——’

Mrs. Boyd almost gasped. She stayed him with uplifted hand.

'Did you say John Somerset?' she asked slowly.

'I didn't mention his Christian name,' was the reply, 'but you've guessed it first time.'

'Does he know you? Does he know who you are? I mean, do you know who he is?'

Mrs. Boyd's questions were like shots from a gun.

'I've known him only since the holidays,' said her son. 'It's just three weeks too long. He's no great shakes, I can tell you. He's an outsider, and not worth a ha'porth of pins. I thought of writing to the squire, and asking him to protest to old Hedges that he ought to be more particular whom he admits into Bramleigh.'

'You didn't—tell me you didn't write,' she urged, grasping him by the arm, and searching his face with anxious eyes.

'No, I didn't,' said Boyd. 'But, mother, what do you know about Somerset?'

'Everything,' she said. 'I've journeyed here to tell you. I felt I could not commit the warning to paper. All my years of planning and scheming may come to naught if——'

'But what is it all about?' queried Boyd, with surprise in eyes and voice. 'I don't understand a little bit.'

Mrs. Boyd drew her boy closer to her, and whispered long and rapidly in his ear, until the porter, ringing a bell, broke in upon her narrative.

'Now do you understand?' she asked. 'I must catch the incoming train. Remember the advantage is all on your side. Somerset is in ignorance, while you are fully prepared. I shall see Gerald to-morrow at Aldershot, and prepare him for the part he must play in this scandalous plot of the squire's.'

‘Yes, I think I understand,’ her son replied. ‘It is just one of those cranky schemes that would appeal to the squire. But it’s worth a bit to be in the know.’

There was no time for further confidences or advice. The train was at the platform. Boyd escorted his mother to a first-class compartment, from the window of which she was waving her boy farewell a minute later.

Boyd was standing in the same position even when the tail of the train disappeared into the cutting.

‘Somerset,’ he mused. ‘No wonder I was up against the bounder. Instinct, I suppose. All right, Mr. Scholarship Boy! I’m on your track like a sleuth-hound. I’ll do my part to upset the old man’s little game. It’s exactly what the mater called it. It’s a plot—and I’ll upset it at my end. Yes,’ he concluded, ‘by fair means or foul, I’ll upset Jack Somerset.’

V

A REAL GOOD TIP

BURNETT's more than ever was a house divided against itself. Their defeat by the pushful Fags was a terrible facer, upon which Pilditch put the lid by his optical experiment on the captain. All Bramleigh had been tickled immensely. The raillery that the Fourths had to endure in consequence drove some of the more sensitive ones to the verge of madness ; and that Boyd escaped most of the badinage by rigidly keeping to his room whenever possible they considered to be an additional injury.

On this Wednesday half Burnett's skipper had gone by himself to Berringham on an alleged visit to a dentist ; but probably nobody believed it was anything else except to get away from everybody, although as a matter of fact Boyd's dental trouble was genuine.

Newman and Jenner, dressed for hockey, stood at a window quietly discussing the situation. The former was not destitute of good qualities, and ordinarily was willing to sacrifice his own feelings for the good of the house ; but his deposition by Boyd had resulted in no little internal ferment, and certainly the Fourths had not risen in outside estimation.

There was a sudden commotion below. A procession of small fry from the preparatory school had come to a halt in front of Burnett's. The leaders carried a kind of litter consisting of a couple of poles to which was lashed a chair, whereon Tranter minor was seated in state. By the use of grease paints the

youngster's features had been altered into a quite recognizable representation of Boyd with alarmingly pyrotechnic eyes.

The scowling faces at not a few of the windows above rapidly disappeared, their owners standing well back, able to survey the guy, but not exposing themselves to the view of the impudent organizers of a really good rag.

Mrs. Diggles, the housekeeper of Burnett's, happened to be at the door, and she received the visiting-card which the hilarious juveniles left for Boyd; and after some pantomimic play the procession resumed its giddy way to spread itself in front of other houses, where it would meet with a less frigid reception. From Henderson's and Berry's windows dropped largess in the shape of coppers and small silver, which the infants accepted as veritable 'corn of Egypt' in mid-term.

Of course, at Denstone's the Fags received the procession with howls of welcome. They swarmed out of doors and paid homage to the deliriously happy guy, who nearly burst his gorgeous waistcoat with importance, while the contribution-box grew heavier and heavier and promised well for the wind-up at Jimmy Niblett's.

'I'm jiggered!' exclaimed Newman. 'It's enough to make a cat laugh, although personally I feel more inclined to cry to think Boyd made such an ass of himself.'

'It's a rotten state of affairs when even the infants can give us a ragging,' agreed Jenner gloomily. 'And what's more, we know the whole school is enjoying it. Refusing Barwell's request to take on Plymington was a wretched mistake in tactics, and we ought not to

have allowed Boyd to overrule our better judgement.'

Newman made no answer, and Jenner went on in lower tones :

'Some of us were considering matters half an hour ago. We came to the conclusion that, unless Boyd alters his methods, we shall pull him down and set up another in his place. You can guess who is in our minds,' he added meaningly.

'You can jolly well put him out again,' said Newman, 'if you're referring to me. It seems to me some of our crew have got no brains at all, or else they're jellybags of grey matter that wobble just as any fanciful wind blows them.'

'I can enter into your feelings,' replied Jenner ; 'but I was one of the few who openly opposed Boyd from the beginning, and I'm up against him now for all I'm worth. I've got a scheme that will perhaps bring matters to a head, and we're going to call a meeting to discuss it.'

'If it's a sensible proposition, you can rely on Boyd opposing it,' observed Newman confidently.

'I know he will,' agreed Jenner. 'But he'll be beaten to a frazzle on a vote, and then, in parliamentary language, there'll be a General Election—an appeal to the people ; and—and we are the people, and there you are.'

Newman was too human not to evince curiosity. His eyes were asking questions.

'The idea is in a nutshell,' Jenner informed him. 'The Fags have completed their' real fixture-list, because there are comparatively few school third teams with whom to fix up matches ; while we've just four games to play, two of them away from home, and a ghastly smashing awaiting us in each. Now why can't

we draw on the Fags for three or four of their best men to strengthen our weak spots? Let us win a few matches, and the feud go hang.'

'It would be a novelty to be on the winning side,' said Newman slowly. 'Half our house are an under-sized lot, and no enthusiasm in sport to atone for lack of weight and inches. At Denstone's it's just the reverse—the beggars are bigger than us, age for age, and they're absolutely full of beans. I'd vote for amalgamation like a shot. But, geewillikins! just imagine Boyd agreeing to anything of the sort! He'd explode at the mere idea. He would certainly refuse to play, and his shadow, Pilditch, would follow suit.'

'No great loss if we exchanged the one for Kerr and the other for Somerset,' replied Jenner. 'Anyhow, the scheme is a sound one, and we shall get sufficient backers to pass it.'

'You're bargaining without taking the Fags themselves into account,' Newman warned his friend. 'They'll not be at all keen on assisting Burnett's.'

'Don't you believe it,' said Jenner. 'They'll swallow any petty feelings for the sake of a good game. They're built that way. You just wait until our meeting—Boyd will be forced to call it—and we'll wind up the season in better style.'

By this time the Kindergarten guy had finished its perambulation, or at any rate was not in sight, and the two Fourths knew they could venture out without a prospect of being roasted.

On their way across the Quad they encountered Somerset, who was sprinting in the direction of Henderson's. To Newman's astonishment Jenner nodded affably to the Fag, who acknowledged the greeting quite as pleasantly.

'You're putting your revolutionary ideas into practice before the meeting,' suggested Newman.

'Mere chance,' replied Jenner. 'Met him in the post office last night. I wanted a postal order, and had left my money behind me. No time to go back and get it or I should miss the post. Somerset forked out for me at once. I couldn't refuse without being an absolute pig. We walked back together, and, to tell the truth, I'm rather taken with him.'

Somerset was paying a visit to Draycott, who had escaped the 'flue' only to succumb to tonsillitis, which would keep him in bed for a couple of days at least. The Fag had not proposed to stay more than a few minutes, but Draycott was glad of anybody's company but his own; and in addition he had a little commission which he desired the younger boy to execute.

'Get some note-paper and an envelope out of my case,' said the invalid. 'You'll find a fountain-pen on the mantelshelf. Any flat book will do for a pad.'

Somerset obeyed, and the Fiver sat up in bed and scribbled a short note. He addressed the envelope, and handed it to the Fag.

'Post it in the village, and show nobody the address,' he said. 'If I put it in the house-bag in the ordinary way, Henderson might see it, and ask awkward questions.'

Somerset placed the letter in a pocket, and intimated that he would attend to the matter forthwith.

'You're a good sort,' said Draycott as he settled himself back on his pillow. 'Now I'll put you on to a good thing for the Grand National.'

'National what?' asked the Fag.

'Oh! I say,' exclaimed Draycott 'you're less up

to snuff than I thought. The great horse-race, I mean. One of the famous events of the year. My governor's interested in horse-breeding, and gets useful information from the training stables. "Bloodstone" is a real good tip. The odds will be at least 10 to 1, and half a sov. on will bring you in a five-pound note as easy as that'—he snapped his fingers.

'I know nothing about horse-racing,' said the Fag, with a flush. 'Nothing personally, I mean,' he explained. 'At the Brookhurst Aviation Works the men and apprentices bet, and it leads to no end of trouble—disgrace in some cases.'

Draycott raised himself on one elbow and looked at his visitor closely.

'You surprise me,' he said. 'I looked upon you as a thorough sport, and wasn't expecting a sermon.'

'I'm not preaching,' maintained the boy, 'but betting isn't sport, not real sport. If one wins, it is at the expense of those who lose, and very often they can't afford it. They get into all sorts of difficulties, and in some cases are led even to steal to make up the deficiency.'

Draycott did not interrupt, only sat hunched up in bed, his lips twisted a little cynically.

'If betting losses do not lead to crime,' continued Somerset, 'they frequently bring misery, especially to women and children, on whom the money would have been better spent. Even if it were not wrong, betting is too one-sided a game, with long odds on the bookmaker. Several I know in the Brookhurst neighbourhood live on the fat of the land, wear gold watches and massive chains, ride in motor-cars even; while some of the poor fools who help to keep them have to work hard all the week, and they and their wives and

families go short of comforts, and even necessities, when the "dead certs" fail to come off.'

'Well, I'm blessed!' exclaimed Draycott. 'You're a born local preacher, a regular tub-thumping Scripture-monger. In some respects you may be right. Folks who can't afford to lose shouldn't bet, of course; and if they get landed, it serves them right. In our case it's different. It isn't just for money, it's for the excitement of the thing. It gives a spice to life, don't you know.'

'I'm out of it, if even only because I can't afford it,' replied Somerset. 'I certainly can't risk losing half a sovereign, or even half a crown. I shall have a difficulty in making my pocket-money spin out to the end of the term without deliberately chucking some of it away.' The boy hesitated, and his cheeks showed pink. 'I haven't told you one very great reason why I can't bet,' he said. 'I promised my father that I would never back a horse and never play cards for money. He has been mother and father to me, and I couldn't let him down by breaking my word, while he is all across the world, believing in me.'

'No, I suppose not,' agreed Draycott, nodding his head. 'I've made no promises; and as I only possess about fifty bob in the world, I'm planking it on the gee-gee, so that I can gather in twenty-five of the very best. And when I've got my £25, and you want to borrow a dollar at the end of the term, I shall remind you of the chance I gave you.'

Somerset laughingly replied that he hoped to scrape through without borrowing; and if his brother Wilton couldn't help him, if the necessity arose, he should have to worry along as best he could.

'But you spoil your own case by one admission,'

the Fag reminded Draycott. 'You are after more than mere excitement. You want to pick up money that you haven't earned—money for nothing—and it'll be money that the other fools have lost.'

'All right, Somerset Didymus,' laughed Draycott. 'You post my letter, and I'll forgive you. Ta-ta! Look me up again soon.'

The Grand National was run on Friday, and on Saturday morning Somerset got an early look at a newspaper to see the result. 'Bloodstone' fell at a fence, and did not complete the course; and consequently Draycott's fifty shillings had not crystallized into exactly half as many sovereigns.

At midday the Fag called at Henderson's, and found Draycott out of bed, but not allowed to go out of doors.

'I suppose Saint Somerset has come to rag me about "Bloodstone,"' commenced the convalescent, the moment the Fag entered the room. 'Just the fortunes of war. Jolly bad luck the brute came to grief when he was going strongly. I've got to shell out on Monday. Never mind, I shall make the oof-bird whistle a bit to-night. Simply must, or I'll be absolutely on the rocks.'

The Fag's lips parted as if he were about to ask a question, but he didn't voice it.

'Ah! you want to know how I'm going to do it, but I'm not telling you. I don't want a fresh squirt from your heavy morality tap.'

Somerset coloured vividly, for boy-like he had a horror of being considered a goody-goody kill-joy.

'Only my fun,' Draycott assured him. 'It's a free country, and everybody has a right to his own opinion. You're very likely right in quite half what you said

A REAL GOOD TIP

about betting. But if you never did anything w r in this world, you would miss a lot of fun.'

Somerset found himself several times later in the day wondering how the Fiver proposed to replenish his exchequer ; and the information was vouchsafed to him in the evening in a quite unexpected manner. He was just entering Niblett's when he encountered Laxton coming out.

'Hallo !' exclaimed the latter, 'I'll be back in a few minutes. I'm only going to Henderson's with a package for Hylton.' He leant towards Somerset, and whispered, 'Old Niblett thinks I don't know what he wrapped up so carefully, but I saw it distinctly, and it's a pack—of—playing—cards. I guess Hylton, Draycott, Boyd, and Pilditch are having a flutter to-night. There wouldn't half be a row if Henderson could only see through a ceiling or a brick wall.'

Laxton went off at top speed, and Somerset entered the 'tucker' to await his return.

'Did you mean that Draycott and the others are going to play cards for money?' asked Somerset a little later, when they were standing in front of Niblett's fire.

'Ra—ther !' was the reply. 'Boyd, for one, is a terror for a gamble. He's a fortunate beast too. Nearly always wins. Funny that the luck generally falls to the one who could do without it. If a chap wants to win badly because he is stony, you can bet your boots he'll lose, and get into a bigger hobble.'

Somerset wondered whether the oof-bird would whistle the tune that Draycott desired.

VI

A DELICATE COMMISSION

SUNDAY was a quiet day at Bramleigh. Early morning chapel was an hour later than on weekdays, and after breakfast there was an hour and a half interval before attendance at ordinary morning service, which was conducted by Dr. Hedges, or in his absence by the rector of Bramleigh or his curate. In the afternoon the boys were absolutely free to do as they liked within the limits of the college grounds, subject, of course, to the restrictions demanded by due observance of the Sabbath.

Upon this particular Sunday a drizzle set in about two o'clock, and discounted any quiet ambling about the grounds. Some of the Bramleighites dozed or read in their rooms, while a good few hob-nobbed in groups in the Commons.

Boyd had chosen the day as the best to make his reappearance in public, for the fact that it was Sunday would prevent any active rag being directed against him. He sat in a chair in a window apparently immersed in a book, while really his thoughts were elsewhere. Upon his return from Berringham on Wednesday night he found awaiting him a requisition signed by two-thirds of the Fourths, requesting him to convene a full meeting of the house to consider certain suggestions which would be formulated by Jenner.

Boyd had forthwith asked Jenner what was in his mind, only to be told that he would not discuss the matter except at the meeting ; and when the captain thereupon declared it was his intention to ignore the requisition, he was told that Hollier, the vice, would call a meeting in his stead.

Only this afternoon had Pilditch ferreted out the nature of Jenner's proposals, and he had at once informed Boyd what was afoot, giving the captain food for much disturbing thought, which in reality had driven him out of Burnett's, so as to give none of the Fourths any opportunity of driving home their views, together with any unpleasant truths that might occur to them.

Boyd decided that he would give in with apparently good grace so far as calling the meeting was concerned, but any truckling to the Fags he would oppose with all the bitterness of which he was capable. And thus after tea there appeared on Burnett's notice-board an intimation that there would be a house meeting at eight o'clock on Monday evening.

Sunday night was a time of general letter-writing, and Jack Somerset was in the middle of a long budget to his brother at Aldershot when he received a message asking him to pay Draycott a call.

As soon as he entered the study Somerset supposed the Fiver had suffered a relapse. He certainly was not looking nearly so well as on the previous afternoon. But, in response to the younger boy's solicitous inquiry, Draycott averred that his throat was making splendid progress, so much so that he had hoped to venture out on Monday.

' But the doctor absolutely forbids it,' he said, with something like a groan. ' It's imperative that I go to

Berringham on Monday evening, or find somebody else to go for me.'

He was looking very hard and meaningly at his visitor.

'Berringham,' repeated Somerset slowly. 'Why, it's out of bounds. Even on half-days you have not only to gain permission, but fill up a form giving your reasons for the journey.'

'Yes, and a rotten regulation it is,' cried Draycott irritably. 'It's only half an hour's railway ride. The business would occupy not longer than fifteen minutes, and, all told, one needn't be more than ninety minutes. Leave Bramleigh at six o'clock, and be back by half-past seven.'

'If you wish me to go, I dare say Mr. Denstone would give me leave,' said Somerset. 'I think I've been doing some good preps this last week, and he's particularly decent to me. What shall I give as my reason for going?'

'Anything you like,' Draycott replied. 'Any old tale will do. I dare say Denstone will believe you far more readily than would be the case if I asked Henderson for leave.'

'But I've got no business of my own to do in Berringham,' objected Somerset. 'Why can't I tell him I'm going for you, and it would be all right?'

'Jolly well all wrong, you double-breasted juggins,' said Draycott, grinning at the Fag. 'You're a bit of an enigma to me. On some subjects you hold forth like a patriarch, and yet in other directions you are terribly green. You just can't tell Denstone the real business in Berringham; and if you can't oblige a friend—help a lame dog over a stile—I must try somebody else.'

'I'm perfectly willing to go to Berringham,' protested Somerset, 'but I won't tell a lie to Mr. Denstone. I'll take French leave and risk it.'

'And precious little risk there'll be,' Draycott assured him. 'I've done it myself more than once, and should have done it to-morrow if the doctor hadn't been so pig-headed.'

'Very well,' said Somerset. 'Tell me what the mysterious business is, and you can consider it done.' A thought flashed into his mind, and he added, 'So long as you don't want me to do any betting or anything of that kind.'

Draycott laughed at the Fag's proviso.

'All I wish you to do is to call at my uncle's at Berringham,' the Fiver informed him. 'I want some money badly, and you must get the old money-spinner into as generous a mood as possible.'

'It's jolly good to have a relative so near to school,' said Somerset, quite relievedly. 'But you must work on his generosity yourself—write him a note, and pitch it as strongly as you can. He wouldn't listen to any persuasions of mine.'

'Nor mine, either, you immortal noodle,' exclaimed Draycott. 'My uncle keeps a shop over which three brass balls are hung. I want you to put my watch and chain and pencil-case "up the spout," and raise every ha'penny possible on them.'

Somerset's jaw dropped. Draycott's watch and chain and pencil-case were of solid gold, gifts on his last birthday from an aunt who lived abroad. The Fag had never been inside a pawnshop, and would have hoped never to be under the necessity of entering one.

And what he would have hated to do on his own

account he had now committed himself to do for another.

Draycott was watching the Fag, endeavouring to read his thoughts.

'You'll be doing me a bigger service than you can imagine,' the Fiver said with much feeling in his tone. 'Just at present I'm horribly hipped. First that confounded horse must come a bloomer, and since then I've lost a lot of money in—in another way.'

Somerset, in view of Laxton's communication, guessed how the additional loss had been incurred, and at once felt that Draycott was needlessly worrying himself. He did not wish to disclose to the Fiver the full extent of his knowledge, but contented himself with throwing out a diplomatic feeler.

'Surely your creditors can wait, say, to the end of the term,' he suggested. 'If the debt is only just incurred, there should be no difficulty in getting grace for that time.'

'You don't understand,' replied Draycott a little bitterly. 'If it were a tradesman, tailor, shoemaker, or bookseller, you could keep him waiting blue moons for his money, but this is a debt of honour that must be paid on the nail. I can't tell you anything more about it; but I'm "in the soup," and a visit to uncle is the only way out of it.'

'I can't see where the honour comes in,' maintained Somerset. 'Why should the honour be all on one side? Are the creditors not supposed to show a little honourable forbearance, and give you time to wipe out the indebtedness?'

'No, no, no!' replied the Fiver, almost irritably. 'It's waste of breath discussing it. I know my

creditors better than you. Their motto is, "Winners receive, and the de'il take the loser."'

Draycott looked into the fire for a few moments, as if the dancing flames could point a way out of his difficulty.

'I don't suppose you'll like going into a pawnshop,' went on Draycott, 'and it's beastly of me putting you in for it. But really there's nothing in it. It is a straightforward business transaction; the pawnbroker lends money, and he holds property as a guarantee of good faith until the money is repaid. Even kings and queens have pledged their royal jewels. Banks are nothing but glorified pawnshops, for half their business is lending money on property, shares, &c.'

'But the pawnbroker will not lend money for nothing,' remarked Somerset. 'You'll have to tell me what you are willing to pay.'

'He can only charge a fixed rate allowed by law,' answered Draycott. 'I've been looking it up in a reference-book. The interest is a halfpenny for every two shillings per month.'

'Jolly good bargain for the pawnbroker too,' said Somerset, after a rapid calculation. 'Why, it's 25 per cent. without any risk whatever, since he will be holding good security, for I dare say he'll take good care not to lend anything like full value.'

'Beggars can't be choosers,' and there was a note of despondency in Draycott's tone. 'I'm glad you are willing to oblige me, because I know you are one who can hold his tongue. I shall now feel easier in my mind. Come to me immediately after tea to-morrow, and I'll have everything fixed up, trains there and back, and any other item that occurs to me.'

Somerset stood up and reached for his cap.

'One more thing,' said Draycott. 'As you pass Burnett's you might leave a couple of notes for me. It'll not take me more than a few moments to write them.'

'There you are,' he said a little later, handing the envelopes to the Fag. 'Good-night, old man, and a thousand thanks. Some day when you're in a hole—hope you never will be—I shall consider it up to me to give you a hand. Good-night!'

At the bottom of the stairs Somerset inspected the envelopes. They were addressed to Boyd and Pilditch respectively.

'And they are pushing Draycott into this rotten business,' he mused. 'Wouldn't I like to tell them exactly what I think of them!'

Somerset returned to Denstone's and completed his interrupted letter. He had been reading a book the greater part of the day, which he had intended to complete before bedtime; but after his visit to Draycott he found it practically impossible to focus his mind on the written story. His thoughts constantly reverted to the drama which was being enacted in the school, and in which he had been called unexpectedly to play a minor part.

All day on Monday Somerset was rather *distract*. As the time approached for him to carry out Draycott's commission, he found himself viewing it with growing repugnance. More than once he wondered whether he dare appeal to Boyd and Pilditch to exercise a little generosity in the matter of Draycott's indebtedness to them; but it was certain that he would be the last in the world likely to influence Boyd and his satellite. Nor would Draycott thank him for intervention that had for its object any interference with the

recognized rules of 'playing the game,' according to the gamblers' code.

It could not be said that Somerset made a good tea. He was anxious to commence his distasteful task, the sooner to accomplish it. Nor could he banish from his mind the fact that there was more than a mere *souçon* of personal risk in his mission. Punishment for being out of bounds, especially on school days, was always prompt and drastic; and as it was the Fag's first breach, he had no precedents to guide him how to act if caught. Of only one thing was he certain, and that was he would have to take all the consequences, for he was bound in honour to respect Draycott's secret.

When Somerset went over to Henderson's to receive the Fiver's final instructions, he found his senior so transparently grateful for what he was undertaking that the Fag found his distaste for the task discounted to a very considerable extent. Here was a good-hearted if mistaken fellow in a fix, and Somerset would sink all personal considerations to do him a good turn and bring ease to a harassed mind.

The worst of it was that he doubted the efficacy of Draycott's plan, which would increase his indebtedness by 25 per cent. He was only getting rid of one burden by taking up a heavier one. True, he would be allowed time to liquidate the debt; but in the meantime there was no guarantee that the gambler would not again tempt fortune to straighten out his tangled skein, only to get it into a more heart-breaking scrabble. But Draycott broke in upon his thoughts.

'Here you are,' he said, reading from a half-sheet of note-paper; '5.55 train to Berringham, arrives there 6.25. Blenkin's pawnbroking establishment is in a side street nearly opposite the station. The watch

and chain and pencil-case are worth £25. Ask for £15 to be lent on them. You'll have to take what is offered, but stick out for £15, if there's any chance of getting it. There's a return train at 6.50. You'll be back in the village at 7.20. If you should happen to miss it, there's another half an hour later. If you call at the post office for a stamp, you'll be able to say you've been there. Good luck, old son, and scoot like mad, or you'll miss the train.'

Draycott crammed a packet into his messenger's pocket, hustled him out of the room, and he heard the Fag going down the stairs two steps at a time.

Somerset raced all the way to the station, and even then only reached the platform just as the train was on the move. He opened a door and sprang into a compartment—and found himself in for a journey with Maurice Boyd for a companion.

VII

JUNGLED

THE unexpected meeting of Boyd and Somerset in the narrow confines of a railway-carriage compartment would have vastly entertained some of the Bramleighites could they have witnessed it. If the Fag had been suffering from plague, he could not have been viewed more distastefully by Burnett's skipper ; and, on the other hand, Somerset, engaged in a surreptitious journey, felt about as pleased as if he had stumbled suddenly into the presence of a master.

When the train drew up at the next station, Boyd promptly arose and left the compartment. Somerset, out of the tail of his eye, watched the Fourth, hoping that he had reached the end of his journey ; but Boyd only removed himself as far as the next compartment.

Exactly at 6.25 Somerset jumped on to Berringham platform. He was in a desperate hurry, for he wished to make no mistake in catching the first return-train specified by Draycott. Boyd very promptly alighted too, for he had an idea that it might be worth while to see what was Somerset's business. As he passed the compartment just vacated by the Fag, he espied a book on the seat, and it was but the work of a moment for the Fourth to secure the volume and slip it into his pocket.

Hurrying out of the station, Boyd was in time to see Somerset crossing the road towards a side street ; and the Fourth promptly took up a position from which

he could perceive the further movements of the obnoxious Fag.

Blenkin's shop was but a few doors from the street corner, and when Somerset disappeared Boyd put on a sprint and reached the spot in something under a minute, and was not a little surprised to find that the Fag had evidently entered a pawnbroking establishment. He soon satisfied himself that the quarry was not in the front shop, and therefore must have entered by an unassuming door that was labelled 'pledge office.'

Down this dimly lighted passage stole Boyd, until he reached a number of little box-like compartments that opened on to the pawnbroker's counter within. He ascertained in which box Somerset had taken his stand, and through a crack in the door endeavoured to witness whatever transaction was taking place. He could see the pawnbroker examining a watch, but could not hear what was being said. Boyd was anxious that Somerset should not learn that he had been watched, and having seen quite sufficient for his purpose he hurried away to the dentist, who had only to inspect the stopping of a tooth.

Somerset found that the transaction on Draycott's behalf in which he had engaged could not be carried out with quite the celerity that the owner of the valuables had imagined. The pawnbroker seemed consumed by a burning desire to learn various particulars which Somerset did not wish to disclose. He gave Draycott's correct name and his home address, which happened to be a hundred and fifty miles distant. The tradesman did not seem at all keen on the business, appeared to be suspicious of Somerset's bona fides, hinted that it might be advisable to take the advice

of the police on the matter ; and at last in sheer desperation the Fag confided comparatively full and correct details, on the assurance that the information would be considered strictly private.

The bare mention of a loan of £15 appeared to give the pawnbroker a violent shock, and forthwith he commenced to wrap up the articles as though the business was not worth further breath.

' Fourteen,' suggested Somerset in a timid tone that he scarcely recognized as his own.

' Ten,' was the reply ; ' and if you talked for a month, I wouldn't raise it to guineas.'

Somerset recognized the discussion had attained finality, and intimated his acceptance of the amount. In a few minutes a contract-ticket was duly made out, for which he paid one penny ; and the sum of £10 in gold was placed on the counter, which Somerset stowed in an inside pocket, and, with a feeling of relief, made his way into the street.

Glancing at a clock, the Fag perceived that he had been left no margin of time to allow of even the briefest inspection of Berringham's principal street. At that moment, too, he discovered the loss of his book, and would just have time to make inquiry at the lost-property office within the station. There disappointment awaited him ; no book had come to hand, and he took his seat in the train for Bramleigh, the carriage doors of which were being closed in readiness for the start.

Somerset did not know that Boyd was on the train, nor did he see him hand a book to a railway porter just as the train was leaving the platform.

When Bramleigh was reached at 7.20, Boyd appeared not to see the Fag, who was not anxious to obtrude his

presence. He allowed the captain of Burnett's to get well in advance, and then paid a call at the post office. It was 7.40 when he passed through the porter's lodge and made his way to the Quad. For a moment he hesitated whether to go direct to Draycott, but upon second thoughts decided to show himself first at Denstone's. He went upstairs, and had barely reached the landing when Laxton accosted him, and drew him into the nearest study, which at the moment happened to be unoccupied.

'Where on earth have you been all this time?' asked Laxton. 'Denstone has been kicking up no end of a hullabaloo. Set up a regular hue and cry after you.'

Somerset felt like a criminal upon whom the law had suddenly dropped its long hand.

'Why was he inquiring after me particularly?' he asked.

'It wouldn't have mattered a hang about you if we could only have found a book he wanted,' replied Laxton. 'He said he lent you Kipling's *Jungle Book*, and he wanted it frantically. He had a most important letter to post to-night, but had forgotten the address, which he had jotted down on the fly-leaf of the *Jungle*. We searched high and low for it, but couldn't find it, so supposed you had got the book with you. If you'll hurry up, Mr. Denstone may yet catch the post.'

Somerset was paralysed. He groaned at the thought that the book was miles and miles away. It was certainly as far as Berringham, and goodness only knew how much farther. It might turn up some day, or it might have got into the hands of some dishonest person, who would retain it.

When he discovered the loss of the book, it occurred to him that he might have to purchase another to

replace it; but he had never dreamt of this nothing less than disaster that would follow in the wake of his inadvertence.

‘Get a move on, Somerset,’ advised Laxton, ‘or tell me where the book is, and I will fetch it.’

‘I can’t,’ replied Somerset. ‘I’ve lost the book, and haven’t an idea where to look for it.’

‘But that’s all stuff,’ exclaimed Laxton. ‘I saw the book under your arm myself at tea-time. You must know where you’ve been since. Now pull yourself together and think, and——’

‘I’ve been out of bounds,’ blurted out Somerset, ‘and the book’s lost, probably for good.’

Laxton’s face filled with sympathy, but it did not prevent him expressing an opinion.

‘Denstone’s been as mad as a bull for the past hour,’ he said. ‘When he learns the truth, he’ll blow you sky high. You’d better go and throw it off your chest and get it over.’

But that was just the crux of Somerset’s difficulty—he did not wish the master to learn the truth.

There was no further time allowed him for thought, for Mr. Denstone came up the stairs like a hurricane.

‘Here you are at last,’ he cried, far from amiably. ‘Niblett told me you had just come in from the village. I don’t recollect giving you permission to leave the grounds. Where have you been?’

‘I had just come from the post office when Niblett saw me,’ said Somerset hesitatingly.

‘Well, never mind that now,’ replied the master. ‘I require my *Jungle Book* for a moment. Please get it as quickly as possible.’

‘I’m exceedingly sorry, sir, but I’ve lost it, and I can’t think—think—where to look for it’ stammered

Somerset, ready to kick himself at the predicament in which he had landed himself.

Mr. Denstone ordinarily was one of the mildest mannered of the staff, but he gave little evidence of it during the next few moments. He declared that the Fag would have to replace the book, and would also have to pay the cost of a long-distance telephone call that would be necessary to obtain the required address from a friend.

'Go to your room, and stay there until I send for you in an hour's time,' ordered the master sternly. 'I shall want an explanation of your absence from the school precincts without permission.' He strode away, but turned back for a further word. 'I'm exceedingly angry,' he added, 'but I'm hurt still more. I'm disappointed in you—intensely disappointed.'

So was Jack Somerset—disappointed almost to the point of heart-break. Frank by nature, he would have dearly loved to make a clean breast of the matter; but there was Draycott to consider. He could do nothing that might lead to a breach of confidence with his Fiver friend. He had embarked on the path of deception, and was already in a perfect quagmire that was threatening to overwhelm him.

Thought of Draycott reminded him that the invalid would be anxiously awaiting the result of his mission.

He decided to steal off to Henderson's at once before the interview with Mr. Denstone, after which he might not be able to get out of the house until the morrow, and possibly not then.

Somerset three minutes later was in Draycott's room handing him the £10, and telling him as briefly as possible the difficulty he had experienced in securing even that sum. Draycott was bitterly disappointed

and made no attempt to hide it. The money would do little more than wipe out his debts of honour and leave him practically broken for the remainder of the term.

The invalid was feeling low and depressed, and seemed almost to blame his messenger for not meeting with better success. It was the last straw that broke poor Somerset's spirit, and he got out of Henderson's as speedily as possible, without breathing a word of his own trouble.

Trouble by no means expressed it, as he realized on his return to his own house. Mr. Denstone had already sent for him, and was doubly wroth to find that Somerset had disobeyed him. It was an almost unrecognizable master who awaited the culprit. The boy winced under the opprobrious terms that were levelled at him, words that bit deeply into his self-respect, that almost made him loathe himself, because he could offer nothing in extenuation of his offence.

'Now perhaps you will tell me exactly where you were between six o'clock and 7.30,' said Mr. Denstone coldly, after a silence that the boy found even more trying than the verbal lashing to which he had been subjected.

Somerset was about to take his courage in both hands and boldly avow that he had been to Berringham. He would plead that he had not been engaged upon business of his own, and trust to the master's generosity not to press questions that would involve a breach of faith with a third person.

There was an interruption—a knock at the study door. In response to Mr. Denstone's call a servant appeared bearing a small parcel for which his signature was required upon a printed slip. The master read the form slowly and wonderingly, and then took

up the packet, from which he tore its brown paper wrapping, exposing to view the missing *Jungle Book* that had proved to be Somerset's undoing.

Ejaculations of surprise escaped both master and boy, and their eyes met.

Somerset was mortified to the quick. The frank admission that he had proposed to make was utterly discounted, since it would come only after Mr. Denstone had found him out.

'This book was picked up at Berringham Station at ten minutes to seven this evening,' said the master in a voice that was like the breath of an Arctic blast. 'I suppose it travelled there itself while you went to the village post office.'

Somerset had never imagined the human voice was capable of such scorn and sarcasm. It whipped him into a wild desire to say something in his own defence that might do a little towards his rehabilitation. But Mr Denstone forbade him with upraised hand, and more so with the twisted lip that accompanied the movement.

'I have no wish to hear a word from you,' he said. 'The sooner you retire to your own room the better I shall be pleased. I will deal with you to-morrow.'

VIII

END OF A FEUD

AT Burnett's it was felt that the meeting called for Monday night was fraught with consequence. During the past few days the majority of the Fourths had split up into two openly declared rival camps, each with a policy diametrically opposed to the other. Pilditch, acting as Boyd's scout and general intelligence officer, reported to his chief that the opposition meant business, and had attracted several unexpected adherents to their cause. So far as the skipper's jackal could ascertain from those willing to make known their intentions, the voting promised to be about even; but half a dozen, led by Nisbet, had declared themselves Independents, who would be guided by the arguments advanced at the meeting.

Unfortunately for Boyd it was not at all improbable that Nisbet was smarting from the skipper's treatment of him in a purely personal matter, and of which the rest of the house were not cognizant. The present *emeute* would be Nisbet's opportunity to pay off the score. A fortnight earlier Boyd could have brought the malcontent smartly to heel; but since that time Nisbet had discharged his obligation, and was perfectly free to act exactly as his own inclinations led him.

Thus it was that, when Pilditch expressed the conviction that the result of the meeting depended solely on the Nisbetites, Boyd experienced distinct premonitions of serious trouble. Hitherto when his authority

was challenged he had entered the fray with a practically assured majority at his back, and had treated the opposition with the scantiest ceremony, but now——

When Boyd announced his intention of running over to Berringham immediately after tea, it was buzzed about Burnett's that the captain meant to shirk the meeting, and all kinds of speculations were rife concerning what might happen in his absence.

Pilditch besought Boyd to be sure not to make any mistake about his return in time, or the opposition would sweep the board, for the loyalty of some of their declared supporters would take offence if the skipper showed any symptoms of funk.

'You've got to step into the breach, my boy,' said Pilditch. 'I think I've nobbled Dennis, who has been as thick as thieves with Jenner, and one defection may shake some other wobblers. One or two may decide not to vote either way, and that will be something in our favour.'

Boyd bade his lieutenant not to fear for a moment that he intended to show the white feather.

'I've weathered storms before,' he remarked, with an assumption of confidence that possibly was overdone. 'I shall be present, and I shall come out on top, and be able to put one or two in their right places once and for all.'

On his way to Berringham Boyd certainly did not present the aspect of one confident of victory. He had read the portents accurately, and, in his own words, believed that his 'number was up unless a miracle happened.'

During the fifteen miles' railway journey Burnett's captain was enveloped in gloom, as he considered all kinds of scheming possibilities that might serve his

ends, but he could hit upon nothing that promised the slightest amelioration ; and gradually he dropped into a fatalistic mood with apathy in the ascendant, and a mental declaration that he did not care a button whether Burnett's threw him over or not. He would put up the best fight possible, and there an end of it.

But the discovery of the book left in the adjoining compartment Boyd accepted as an augury that his luck would turn the scale ; and when he learned the Fag's business in Berringham, he was doubly assured of it. And thus he returned to school in a much better humour than he had left it, nerved and heartened for the fight for supremacy that lay before him.

Boyd in due course presided over the meeting of the Fourths, not one of whom was absent, in itself a plain indication that the house recognized that a crisis had been reached in its affairs.

It fell to the lot of the instigator of the meeting to expound his views as soon as Boyd had formally declared the business open. Jenner arose with some notes jotted on a sheet of note-paper in his hand, and forthwith plunged into a series of arguments that were but enlargements of the views he had expressed to Newman a few days earlier.

Time after time the speaker drew emphatic expressions of dissent from Boyd, Pilditch, and a few others ; but Jenner was assured that he had the sympathy of the bulk of his audience, and he continued to marshal his facts with skill, and some of his neat points obviously impressed some of the waverers. Eventually he sat down to the tune of considerable applause, which was no pleasant hearing for the captain and his acknowledged supporters.

Boyd immediately replied to Jenner's fulminations.

He spoke with heat and bitterness. As he warmed to his subject he could not repress personalities, which speedily aroused resentment and frequent interruptions. Even Boyd's best friends lamented his lack of discernment, his total inability to gauge the temper of the opposition. He made no attempt to meet Jenner's arguments, only held him up to ridicule. In a wild peroration he heaped scorn on the Fags; foretold that any even temporary alliance with them would make Burnett's a mockery and a byword; and finally declared that he would resign the captaincy forthwith if Jenner's idiotic proposals were carried.

No one in the opposition rising to speak in support of Jenner, Pilditch at once got to his feet with an idea of smoothing over some of Boyd's ill-judged remarks.

The meeting gave him the shortest shrift imaginable. He was simply howled down, followed by loud demands for a 'vote.'

Boyd sat stubbornly silent until Nisbet tugged his sleeve, which the captain accepted as a token of support.

'Very well. "vote" it shall be,' he announced sullenly. 'Jenner has moved a resolution, to which I have proposed an amendment; neither has been seconded, and a vote will be informal and not really binding on anybody.'

Boyd hoped that he would be able to draw Newman, and thus secure another chance of speaking, and treat the erstwhile captain to a shaking up that would give even some of his supporters pause. But Newman refused to fall into the trap, and Kerby promptly rose, formally seconded the resolution, and sat down again.

Several of the Boyd party were anxious to second the amendment, but Nisbet was accorded the honour by the chairman, who viewed his adherence as an

absolute certainty ; and if he carried his clique with him, the Jennerites would be defeated—possibly by a very narrow majority, but Boyd was determined to carry the day, if only by his own casting vote.

Imbued with a fresh accession of confidence, Boyd proposed to take a show of hands upon the amendment, only to be met with an insistent appeal for a ballot, and it was apparent that nothing less would satisfy the majority.

Boyd gave way with an outward show of grace that was by no means in accord with his real feelings ; and voting slips were hastily torn out of an exercise-book and handed round.

The captain's eyes closely followed the movement of Nisbet's pencil, and it was with a spasm of dismay that he felt assured it was not his name that Nisbet was inscribing ; it certainly was a word of more than four letters.

A couple of scrutineers were appointed ; and when the twenty-four slips were handed in, it did not occupy more than ninety seconds to ascertain the result.

'For the amendment, 9 ; for the resolution, 15,' announced Hollier, amid a tense silence.

Boyd cast a look of scathing contempt upon Nisbet, who had controlled the half-dozen votes that had carried the day. Nisbet showed no perturbation. He had long desired to cry quits with Boyd, and any exhibition of resentment only added to his enjoyment.

Without a word the captain left the room, followed by Pilditch and only three others ; and scarcely had the door closed behind them than Nisbet proposed that Jenner take the chair and continue the meeting.

Jenner speedily got to business, and announced that he had informally approached Kerr, and the Fags were

quite willing to entertain proposals for assisting Burnett's in the remainder of their matches ; and if a small deputation met the Fags, some satisfactory arrangement would result.

Newman, Jenner, and Nisbet were appointed members of the deputation, and then the score of boys looked around at each other waiting for some one to make the next move.

The resolution having been carried, it was assumed that Boyd's resignation naturally followed in accordance with his declared threat. But that there should be no mistake in the matter, Hollier was dispatched to ask Boyd what were his actual intentions.

Hollier quickly returned with a very flushed face, and announced :

' He's in the vilest temper imaginable, and says we can hang ourselves for all he cares.'

The course being clear, Jenner promptly proposed the re-election of Newman as captain of Burnett's, expressing regret that in a mistaken moment they had deposed him, but assuring him of undivided support of those present in the future.

The proposal meeting with unanimous support, Newman intimated his acceptance of the office, and promised to do all in his power to restore the house to its aforetime dignity.

It was decided to dispatch a note to Boyd to acquaint him with the decision ; and when all present had affixed their signatures, the meeting was declared over.

Boyd's ill-starred rule was at an end ; so was the feud with the Fags !

With the quickness of mental telepathy Bramleigh was speedily in possession of news that would keep tongues wagging long after ' lights out.'

The downfall of Boyd elicited practically no sympathy in any of the houses, which was very practical testimony to his unlovable disposition and generally overbearing manner to all those who were not prepared to subscribe to his opinions.

The case of Somerset was very different. Not only were the Fags sympathetic to a man, but in the upper houses many wishes were expressed that the popular Fag would speedily see an end of his trouble.

Barwell in particular was full of regret at his favourite's serious breach of discipline.

'I wouldn't have believed it,' he said to Carrington. 'It's most unfortunate, too, at the present juncture, for I happen to know that there is something on the boards that this business will knock acock as sure as a gun.'

Boyd heard the news from Pilditch, and for the moment at least it drove out of his mind even thoughts of his own downfall.

'A score against Mr. Interloper,' he murmured. 'He owes it solely to me, and has no idea that I engineered it. It was a jolly cute move of mine, and worked far better than even I expected.'

Draycott was probably the only Bramleighite who failed to hear of Somerset's misfortune, although more than any other he was vitally interested in it. He had retired early to bed, and would not learn the news until the morrow.

And Jack Somerset! He too retired, but not to sleep. All through the lagging hours he heard each quarter chime from the clock-tower. His mind travelled in a continual circle that afforded him not a glimpse of a mental turning to the terribly long lane into which his course had been switched with such dramatic suddenness.

IX

AFTERMATH

DAYLIGHT found Somerset wild-eyed and unrefreshed. The approaching interview with Mr. Denstone now filled his horizon ; and instead of time progressing on leaden feet, he wondered that the quarters could be marked off at such relentless speed.

At length the school bell sounded, which was the signal for electric bells to set ringing in the houses to awaken Bramleigh to the duties of a new day. Somerset speedily was reminded that he was in purgatory by the receipt of a note from Mr. Denstone, probably written late the previous night. The culprit was informed that he was not to attend chapel, and breakfast would be sent up to his room, where he was to remain until further instructions.

That penal breakfast nearly choked Somerset, as he thought of 'hall' and the Fags' table, around which were a score or more of happy faces with many a quip to wait on appetite.

On the other hand, it would have been balm to his suffering spirit if he could have heard the sympathetic references to his plight that were made not only at Denstone's table, but at Henderson's and Berry's ; while even at Burnett's Newman and Jenner remarked on Somerset's absence from his accustomed place, and signalled to Kerr their regrets that one of his flock was in durance vile.

Just when the meal was at end Barwell was handed an envelope bearing the word 'Urgent' doubly underlined in red ink, which sent him pell-mell from the table out of 'hall' and across the Quad to Henderson's. He strode upstairs, knocked at Draycott's door, and entered the room without waiting for its occupant's formal permission.

The captain was surprised to find Draycott in his dressing-gown sitting over the fire.

'And what's your pleasure, my chirpy invalid?' inquired Barwell, coming to a stand on the hearth-rug. 'Was it a big supper or an uneasy conscience that caused you to commence spilling ink so early? I thought perhaps you had got the bailiffs in for the rent. Joking apart, what's the trouble?'

'Somerset's my trouble,' was the reply. 'I heard casually from one of the servants that he's in hot water, and sent for you to tell me if it's true.'

'True enough and hot water enough, boiling hot apparently,' said Barwell. 'I had hoped to see him by this time, but Denstone has dropped solitary confinement on him for the present. If your note had not arrived, I intended asking Denstone to tell me the exact state of affairs, for probably the current accounts are no end garbled.'

'Go ahead and tell me all you've heard,' urged Draycott, 'and probably I'll be able to fill in the missing links.'

'Now don't tell me you've been going in for thought-reading, astrology, necromancy, or what not,' said Barwell, a little wonderingly.

'Cut the cackle and get at it,' advised Draycott irritably. 'I'm in dead earnest, and in no humour for having my leg pulled.'

Barwell, perceiving that the Fiver was absolutely irresponsive to chaff, rapidly outlined all that was known of Somerset's case, and awaited the invalid's comments.

Draycott was uneasy : he wriggled in his chair, and failed to look openly at the captain as was his wont. But presently he plucked up courage, and wearily squared his shoulders.

'Now listen to me,' he commenced. 'I knew that Somerset had been to Berringham, for he went to oblige me. I had some business to transact there. It was frightfully important, and I was cooped up and unable to attend to it myself.'

'What was the business, Dray?' quietly asked Barwell, who was sitting with his legs crossed and his hands clasped at the back of his head.

'I'm not going to tell you,' protested Draycott. 'Not because I can't trust you,' he added apologetically, 'but because the less who know it the better. It makes no difference to Somerset one way or the other.'

'If you can only treat me to half-confidences, I'll leave you to it,' said Barwell, standing up. 'I'm most anxious to help Somerset ; but if I can get to see him, I'll guarantee he'll not so much as mention your name. The little you have told me seems to me to indicate that it's your bounden duty to be frank with me. You can trust me not to give you away ; but if I am to approach Denstone I must be armed with the full story, not necessarily to publish it, but simply for my own guidance.'

'Yes, yes, I know,' responded Draycott weakly. 'Of course I can trust you ; I said so earlier. But when a fellow's made a silly ass of himself, naturally he hesitates——'

'He shouldn't hesitate a moment to lend a hand to the one who is being sacrificed for himself,' interrupted the captain.

'Sacrificed?' replied the Fiver in a tone that suggested the term was too strong.

'That was what I said,' the captain answered. 'Somerset broke bounds to go to Berringham—for you. He was found out, and in a fit of blue funk, or stage fright, told a lie—for you. Even after that, when under detention orders, he steals off for another few minutes' absence. I do not know, but I can now give a good guess, that it was to see you on your business, not his. Again he is found out, and gets into hotter water—for you. What do you call that but being sacrificed?' asked Barwell on a decidedly acrimonious note.

The captain noted Draycott's pale drawn face. His heart smote him a little, for he judged that the poor fellow, who had been on a low diet for days, was scarcely in a condition for very cogent reasoning.

'Don't think I'm hard on you, Dray,' he resumed. 'You're not in the best of form to tackle this problem. Just tell me all about it, and leave me to do all I can for the couple of you.'

Draycott gratefully nodded acquiescence, and shortly related the whole story, save that he did not disclose how his indebtedness arose, nor did he give the names of his creditors.

Barwell was silent for a few moments, revolving the matter in his mind.

'You haven't told me quite everything,' he said presently; 'but I can guess that either horses or cards are at the bottom of the trouble. I warned you a year ago that the rotten business would land you some

day in serious trouble. Why I should be plagued with such fool cubs is past my understanding.'

'But you will help this time, won't you?' pleaded Draycott.

'Now that I know more I'm not certain that I would stir a peg to assist you,' was the prompt response. 'At the present moment your only trouble is with your own conscience. My concern is for Somerset. It's perfectly putrid that your betting should have got Denstone up against him. The matter is bound to be referred to Dr. Hedges; and if he declare the punishment I expect, you will have worked Somerset a very serious injury. And all on account of betting,' he added savagely. 'You are the real culprit, and yet the punishment is falling on a very decent kid who, so far as racing actually goes, doesn't know a steeplechaser from a cos-t'er's moke. Ugh!' he concluded, 'you give me the pip.'

The bell was going, and warned Barwell that he could spend no more time in Henderson's. He bade Draycott, after all, an encouraging adieu, promising to do his best, but warning him not to be surprised if Mr. Denstone paid him a visit.

'If he does come to see you,' said Barwell, 'you must use your own discretion to guide you what to say. I shall simply tell him that Somerset went to Berringham on business for you, and it's ten to one Denstone will not press to learn its exact nature.'

Before Draycott could express his thanks the captain had gone.

At the foot of the stairs Barwell ran up against Myddleton, the skipper of Henderson's, who was an inveterate bookworm, and cared little how his house was ordered so long as other people's affairs did not encroach on his own time.

'Just been to see your invalid,' said Barwell. 'He's looking pretty seedy.'

'Doesn't take sufficient care of himself,' replied Myddleton. 'On Saturday I advised him to sport his oak and avoid the excitement of visitors. In the evening he had Boyd and Pilditch in, and I think Hylton was another. They were there till nearly "lights out." Once I thought I heard them quarrelling. I intended going in; but I was at work on some conics, and quite forgot the matter until you reminded me.'

'Probably I was wrong about racing,' surmised the captain as he went on his way. 'More likely cards, and I'm not at all surprised to find Boyd mixed up in the business.'

Barwell easily obtained Mr. Berry's permission to absent himself from class for a few minutes in order to have a word with Mr. Denstone in his room.

The master of the Fags and the captain of the school were on excellent terms, and the moment Barwell made his appearance Mr. Denstone guessed that the visit was not unconnected with Somerset; and knowing the captain's special interest in the boy from Brookhurst, he rather welcomed a talk before he carried the matter to the principal.

Mr. Denstone in a very few words related all he knew of the matter, winding up with an expression of his deep regret that a boy, of whom he had grown quite fond, should have broken down in so disappointing a style.

'Of course, he will receive a smarting imposition,' said Mr. Denstone, 'and he will forfeit his promotion to the Fourth until the end of the summer term. I feel sure that will be the doctor's decision. It just

shows how one may be mistaken in a boy. I could have declared he was free from most of even the smaller vices of the average schoolboy.'

'He is,' was the captain's terse affirmation. 'He's the soundest chap for his age that I think I've ever met. In this instance he is more sinned against than sinning. Out of sheer goodness of heart he undertook a commission in Berringham for a senior who was unable to go himself. He was only absent an hour and a half, and he was tripped up by the merest fluke. If he said he had just come from the post office, I should go bail for him that it was so. Of course, it was an evasion, but it was not a direct lie.'

Barwell perceived the master's surprise that he should apparently be making light of the attempted deception, and hastened to explain.

'What I mean, sir, is this: if you had asked Somerset whether he had been out of bounds, he would have acknowledged it without hesitation. He would have told you the whole story, except the name of the senior who sent him and the nature of the business.'

Barwell's stout advocacy of Somerset caused comprehension to dawn in Mr. Denstone's eyes.

'Do you mean he went to Berringham for you?' he asked.

'Of course not,' Barwell assured him with a laugh. 'You don't suppose I'd have sufficient cheek to come pleading for him while I shielded myself behind him?'

'Did you mean a senior who was physically unable to go to Berringham himself?' inquired the master thoughtfully. 'If so, you were probably referring to Draycott.'

'You've got it this time,' said Barwell. 'I've been

talking to Draycott. I've given him a good dressing-down, sick as he is. It struck me you might like to speak to him, and in fact I've told him he may expect you. By-the-by, sir,' he added, 'I know what the Berringham business was, and I'll deal with the matter myself when the occasion is ripe for it.'

Barwell meant that he would keep a sharper look out for gambling, especially where Boyd was concerned. But he quite expected his statement to have the effect of causing Mr. Denstone not to be unduly inquisitive on the point.

Mr. Denstone went over almost immediately to interview Draycott, who experienced a very bad quarter of an hour, during which he was informed that he would be reported to Mr. Henderson for punishment.

One statement of the invalid's certainly did Somerset's cause no harm.

'He wasn't really keen on going,' said Draycott, 'and had I not been ill he would have refused to oblige me. I suggested that if he asked for leave you would probably grant it, and would not look too closely into a fictitious reason for the journey. He answered me plump that if he couldn't tell you the truth he would tell you nothing. He would much prefer to break bounds and risk it. I ought not to have allowed him to do it, but I thought—thought——'

'It wouldn't be found out,' the master completed for him as he turned to go.

Five minutes after leaving Henderson's Mr. Denstone opened the door of Somerset's room. The boy perceived in a moment that this was a very different man from the one whose tongue had lashed him so unmercifully the previous evening. His eyes no longer glinted with anger; his lips were neither pursed nor twisted

with scorn. He was just the everyday master, only a little more solemn, and with pity rather than laughter in his eyes.

‘ Good-morning, Somerset,’ said the master, with an intonation so unexpected that the boy had difficulty in not breaking down, and it was a physical impossibility for him to reply to the greeting.

‘ Had you ever told me a lie previous to last night ? ’ asked Mr. Denstone.

‘ No, sir,’ replied Somerset, ‘ and I loathed myself for deceiving you. I was so taken aback by finding you had been inquiring for me that I scarcely knew whether I was on my head or my heels. I finally made up my mind to make a complete breast of it, and just then the packet arrived. The moment it was opened I felt that I could confess nothing, as you would surely think I had only made a virtue of necessity.’

‘ That was exactly what I should have thought—last night,’ said Mr. Denstone ; ‘ but now I’m prepared to believe you.’

Somerset seemed scarcely able to understand plain English ; doubted whether he could have heard aright ; could hardly credit that the master was holding out his hand, into which the boy tremblingly and diffidently laid his own.

But there was no misunderstanding Mr. Denstone’s firm clasp, which acted like a tonic on Somerset, galvanizing his frame and restoring to him some of his buoyant spirit.

‘ Of course, you will not escape correction for what is considered a very serious breach of discipline,’ Mr. Denstone informed him. ‘ You will receive a heavy imposition that will perhaps help to impress a lesson that may be of value in after years. If you

enter upon any course of deception, you will find that, like a snowball, it grows bigger and bigger as it proceeds. In your case the deception perhaps arose through a mistaken sense of honour, a desire not to break faith with another person. Always remember that no honourable engagement can be based upon deception, and there is no merit in keeping faith at the expense of truth.'

Mr. Denstone searched Somerset with his eyes for a moment, and the bright orbs of the boy met his own unflinchingly.

'You will do five hundred lines,' said the master. 'I can't make them less, or I would do so.'

'I wouldn't care if they were a thousand, sir,' was the reply. 'Nothing matters now that I know you look upon me as a silly ass rather than a liar.'

And the answer did not at all displease the master.

'You may rejoin your class at once or postpone it until afternoon school,' said Mr. Denstone as he turned towards the door.

'I'd prefer to go now, sir,' answered Somerset; and he walked with the master to school, where the Fags were not a little surprised to see the lost one reappear with something of an air of having been to receive a prize instead of a strong dose of tribulation.

Somerset had very little to say to his chums at mid-day concerning his interview with Mr. Denstone. He averred that the master had been very nice, even while he admitted that he had been mulcted in five hundred lines.

'If five hundred lines is how he marks his pleasure, may I be presairved from his real anger,' remarked Kerr sententially. 'But we'll gie ye a wee hand wi' the lines.'

'Very good of you,' replied Somerset; 'but this is an extra special in which I can permit nobody to assist me.'

Ordinarily a five-hundred-line impot was viewed as a gross miscarriage of justice, but Somerset was bearing the burden with an easy nonchalance that puzzled the Fags.

That same evening it was Somerset who was puzzled. The Tranters, major and minor, sought him in the study he shared with Davidson.

'Look here, Som,' said Tranter, 'this young imp'—and he nodded his head towards the blushing Infant—'wishes to win a muchly desired shilling from Nisbet minor, who has dared him to ask you a question. I've warned him it is very likely a rag from Burnett's, and that you will probably shake him out of his socks.'

Somerset smiled at the youngster, who had almost worshipped the Fag since he did battle with Boyd on his behalf.

'Fire away, kid,' said Somerset pleasantly. 'Rag or no rag, you may as well spoil the Egyptians to the tune of a shilling.'

Tranter minor rubbed his hands pleasedly.

'I don't know what it means, but it sounds like a riddle,' he commenced. 'Will you please tell me the time, and how is your Uncle Blenkin?'

Somerset gulped as though he were swallowing a stone, and his face went scarlet; and he realized that the impot was not the only aftermath of that wretched visit to Berringham.

X

A RAG THAT FAILED

THE Royal Blankshires were commonly regarded as a very smart regiment ; whether smartness and efficiency were synonymous was seriously open to question. But the subalterns had no doubts on the subject. Their polo team was a nailer ; their annual point-to-point race was viewed as a society function of the season ; and at ball or reception they enjoyed themselves to the full, and considered they were adding lustre to the regiment.

Of course, there were unkind critics who considered the young officers might devote more attention to work. But the regulations provided for special hours of duty for which a miserly Government awarded very attenuated pay that did little more than meet the mess bills and the expenses incidental to a full programme of sport and amusement. Upon occasion an enthusiastic second lieutenant would be pitchforked into the Blankshires with a fixed determination to learn his profession in the shortest possible time and with an idea of annexing a generalship at a record early age.

Within a very short time it would be conveyed to him, gently but firmly, that his strenuous views did not conform with the recognized ideas of the ' tone ' of the regiment. If he were too dense to recognize the obvious, the subalterns employed methods of their own to reduce him to submission, or else transfer his services elsewhere without delay.

When Second-Lieutenant Wilton Somerset joined the Blankshires, it was bruited about that he was the possessor of rather a dangerous record. Not only had he passed into Sandhurst very high up, but he had left it actually at the top of the list. While he was reported to be uncommonly good at sport, he was always ready to sacrifice it for work, betokening an abnormal frame of mind and a weird outlook on life.

When in due course Somerset arrived, the Blankshires were hopeful that rumour had exaggerated his peculiarities. There was certainly nothing freakish in his appearance. He was more than fairly good-looking, of decidedly athletic build, generally big-boned, and with the biceps of a blacksmith.

'Appears to be not at all a bad sort,' said Fairgray, the adjutant. 'Perhaps there'll be no need to read the Riot Act over him. We'll go slowly, and see how he pans out.'

'Rot!' ejaculated Boyd. 'We know his Sandhurst record, and he'll be a positive menace. The new colonel may receive him with open arms and hold him up as a military prodigy specially worthy of our imitation. Fall foul of him at once, and follow it up with a subaltern's court martial. He'll realize that the quicker he transfers, the better for his health.'

Some of the subalterns wondered at Jerry Boyd's vehemence. He was apt to take quick dislikes; but in this case he was evincing spleen on sight of the new subaltern, if not a little before.

Failing to get his fellows to act upon his advice, Boyd initiated a series of constant petty annoyances that were calculated to make Somerset look ridiculous in the presence of his fellow officers and more than once in front of his company.

Somerset was of remarkably genial disposition, and bore the treatment with aggravating forbearance, which led Boyd to greater and greater lengths. But one day he went too far, and to his intense surprise found himself knocked over the back of a chair. He was on his feet again in an instant, entering the fray with a fierce determination to wipe this human smudge clean off the regimental map.

The contest was short and sharp—too short for the interested onlookers and too utterly drastic for Boyd's liking. He was a mere babe in front of Somerset, who punched him, jabbed him, and finally merely slapped him, as though he wished to deal gently with a refractory child.

The subalterns viewed Boyd's set-back with considerable amusement, but at the end of six months they were regretting that they had not taken his advice and adopted extreme measures with Somerset immediately after he joined. His passion for work was positively shameless; his company was the smartest in the regiment; his men adored him; he had already qualified for two stars; and now, to crown all, was asking for a month's leave in order to attend a course of musketry at Hythe.

These various items totalled up a fair sum in effrontery, but in the eyes of Boyd that last was a positive crime, for he had desired leave to pay a country-house visit, and the colonel refused him permission until after Somerset's return.

The subalterns, in meeting assembled, decided to remonstrate with the offender, which proved to be a mere waste of breath. Somerset was only intensely amused, remarking that he had taken to soldiering to make a profession of it, and was going about it the

best and only way he knew. That same night an urgent council of war was summoned to discuss the crisis, and the proposal that met with most support was to make the rhinoceros-hided slogger the subject of a 'rag' that would bring him to his senses.

But the conspirators remembered that Colonel Warden held very decided views on ragging, and if it came to his ears he would deal out stern punishment to the offenders.

There was a pause in the proceedings, while they waited for some one to give another lead, which presently came from the adjutant.

'We can rag him when we get him on manoeuvres,' he said, slapping his thigh. 'It will be different from ragging him in his quarters. For the first night we shall be billeted at the Queen's Hotel, Blanktown. I shall have the arranging of the rooms, and will take care that Somerset's is nowhere near the colonel's. When he has retired we'll pay him a visit; and if we don't pull off the event my name's not Fairgray.'

The adjutant's plan was viewed as a 'real brainy' idea, and received instant approval.

A manservant had approached with a note for Fairgray.

'Suppose that chap heard what was said?' suggested one of the party, when the man had retired, after receiving a verbal reply.

The adjutant ridiculed the idea, and asserted that in any case the fellow would not dare mention it to anybody.

But Fairgray happened to know little, if anything, of Private Pratt, and it did not occur to him that the fellow was in Somerset's company.

Now Somerset took an uncommon interest in his

men—another offence in the eyes of some of the subalterns—and he had gone out of his way more than once to do Pratt a good turn, for which the private was duly grateful.

As a matter of fact, Pratt had heard quite sufficient of the subalterns' conversation to form a fairly accurate idea of what was afoot, and forthwith he carried the information to Somerset.

The young officer at first hesitated to believe the story, but Pratt assured him that he could not have made a mistake.

'I think you ought to report the matter to the colonel, sir,' advised the private.

'No need,' decided Somerset. 'The manœuvres commence to-morrow; and if you'll provide me with a piece of chalk, I think I'll be able to look after myself. Anyhow, it's up to me to do my best.'

Pratt stared at the officer perplexedly for a moment, and then a grin of understanding illumined his usually stolid features.

'It's a good idea,' he said. 'You mean to——'

'Yes, I mean to——', interrupted Somerset. 'But you had better know nothing about it.'

The next morning the Blankshires set off for manœuvres, and as Somerset strode along by the side of his company the other subalterns exchanged meaning winks with each other. The battalion halted at Blanktown, and after mess in the coffee-room of the Queen's Hotel the adjutant informed the officers where each would sleep.

When Somerset had ascertained that his room was number 16 at the end of the passage on the second floor, he announced that he was going to bed early.

'You'll find your number chalked on the outside of your door,' the adjutant informed him.

'I suppose you intend to have a quiet "swot" at the drill-book before "lights out,"' said Boyd nastily.

'Give me a trial as one of your aides-de-camp when you are gazetted colonel,' begged Lyons.

'I'll bear you in mind,' said Somerset as he turned on his heel.

On the second landing Private Pratt was awaiting him with a piece of chalk obtained from the billiard-room.

'Here it is, sir,' he said. 'The colonel has already gone to bed, but the other officers will not follow until twelve o'clock.'

'Many thanks,' whispered Somerset. 'Now you scuttle off to your own quarters—and you know nothing.'

It was a little after midnight when half a dozen subalterns stole along the corridor towards room number 16. At their head was Fairgray, carrying in one hand a blanket and in the other a leather scabbard, the appointed weapon of execution.

They came to a stand outside the door whereon '16' was chalked; and from within the room came the sound of a heavy snore.

'Sleeping like a hog,' whispered Boyd. 'So much the better. Now step it gently, and take care not to wake him.'

Fairgray led the way into the room, his companions following on tiptoe. There was just sufficient light to show a recumbent form stretched out on the bed.

The adjutant whispered his instructions.

'Lyons and Gregory will cover the beggar's head with the blanket, and Clayton and Pearce will hold him down

if he struggles. Boyd will give him the first half-dozen immediately after I've pronounced sentence. Hi! hi! altogether!

There was a rush of steps across the room, and before the sleeper could realize what was happening his wrists were tightly grasped, and a blanket enveloped his head, quite muffling his protestations.

'It's useless struggling,' said Fairgray, addressing the covered-up victim. 'You have been tried for conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman. The court has found you guilty, and sentenced you to half a dozen strokes each by everybody present. Now, Boyd, do your duty, and see to it that they are well laid on.'

Boyd had been all anxiety to begin. There need be no fear that he would fail to perform his task with a will. The leather scabbard was whirled through the air, and brought down on the recumbent form with a resounding thwack, and a second and a third followed. The victim roared like an angry bull, and presently succeeded in effecting a mighty upheaval. The blanket was snatched from his head, and a furious voice exclaimed:

'Mutiny. by all that's awful! Guard, turn out! Help!

If a bombshell had exploded in the room, the subalterns could not have been more dismayed. They stood for a moment paralysed.

Lyons was the first to find his tongue.

'It doesn't sound like Somerset's voice,' he exclaimed wonderingly.

'Somerset?' echoed the voice from the bed. 'You young blackguards will learn who I am.'

'It's the colonel!' stammered Fairgray, peering

with horror-stricken eyes through the darkness at the figure sitting up in bed. 'Open the door, one of you.'

The whole crowd stampeded to the door, reaching it just as somebody opened it from the outside.

'What's all this racket?' demanded the figure that blocked the exit.

'Close the door, and turn up the light, whoever you are!' cried the colonel. 'The switch is by the door. See that nobody leaves the room.'

The next moment electric light flooded the apartment, revealing the new-comer clad in pyjamas. It was none other than Second-Lieutenant Somerset who was addressing the colonel.

'I heard a noise, sir,' he said, 'and came to see whether anything was amiss. I trust it is nothing serious.'

The colonel only nodded. There was a grim twist on his lips as he surveyed the discomfited crowd, who were wishing the floor would open and deposit them into the cellar.

'Perhaps Mr. Fairgray, as the senior officer present, will explain the meaning of this outrage,' spluttered Colonel Warden.

'It—it was a mistake, sir,' stuttered the adjutant. 'We—we understood—we thought you were Somerset, sir.'

'And you think that is a sufficient excuse?' stormed the colonel. 'What would Somerset be doing in my bed?'

'It's—it's a mistake in the numbers, sir,' the adjutant hastened to explain. 'His room is number 16, sir, and yours number 6, sir.'

'But I am in number 6,' protested the colonel. 'I noticed it particularly before I entered the room.'

Somerset had walked across the room to throw open the door and note the figures marked there.

'It looks as if your number had been altered from 6 to 16, sir, and mine has been changed to 6,' said Somerset in the tone of an innocent child. 'It seems to be quite a—a misunderstanding, sir.'

The colonel was thoughtful for a moment.

'I've no doubt you are right,' he agreed. 'The drubbing was intended for you and not for me. That is sufficient for the present. All of you, except Mr. Somerset, can consider yourselves under arrest, and I'll deal with you in the orderly-room at nine o'clock.'

What took place at the interview never leaked out, but it was certain there would be no more ragging in the Blankshires as long as the colonel was in office.

Somerset said nothing to his fellow subalterns, who quite understood how he had turned the tables on them.

XI

SUDDEN PROMOTION

ON the Wednesday half Jack Somerset was in footer rig, when word came that the doctor required his presence. The Fag had known ever since Monday night that he would be hauled up before the head, and he would be glad to get the ordeal over rather than have it hanging over him. Nevertheless the summons was not calculated to set the boy's festive spirit abubble.

Dr. Hedges' house was at the lower end of the Quad, very nearly opposite Berry's, at a window of which Somerset saw Barwell, who leant out to speak to him.

'You needn't look as though you're going to a funeral,' said the captain. 'The doctor won't hold a post-mortem on Monday night's escapade. He'll mention it, of course; but he really wishes to see you about quite another matter. I won't tell you what it is, but it isn't anything to give you a face as long as a fiddle. Good luck!'

The window had gone down with a bang, and the Fag could not even thank the good-hearted fellow for a tip that bucked him up immensely.

Arrived at Hedges', Somerset was told that he would have to wait a few moments, as the doctor was engaged, and he took a seat close by the study door, which presently opened, and Lieutenant Hedges strode into the hall.

Although Somerset had not been favoured with a second aeroplane flight, he had been to the hangar

several times, and the aviator never omitted giving him a cheery greeting whenever he met him. At the present moment he pretended to view the boy with mock horror.

‘I guess you’d like to come with me and get out of the way,’ he said. ‘What’s the offence—manslaughter, arson, or resisting the school sergeant in the execution of his duty?’

‘Breaking bounds,’ was the quiet reply.

‘Well, I hope it was worth it,’ answered the lieutenant. ‘I don’t think it ever proved so in my case. As far as I remember I always got nicked and scarcely a run for my money. There’s the governor’s bell. Cheer! He’ll not eat you; his bark’s worse than his bite. By-the-by, I’ve just bought a Brookhurst machine, and if you don’t get detention you can come up and have a look at it. Get into some warmer togs unless you’re tied specially to footer.’

Dr. Hedges in appearance possessed none of the characteristics of the popularly accepted college don. He more resembled a keen, alert man of business than a famous Greek scholar and the author of quite a number of well-known educational works.

School teams visiting Bramleigh often expressed a desire to set fire to the study from which emanated various classical text-books that were the bane of their existence, while they wondered that a chap who had stroked Oxford to a gruelling victory in the early seventies could have developed a taste for expounding and elucidating various abstruse matters that the average schoolboy would prefer to leave alone.

But, then, these critics had never experienced the magic personality of the one who, if he ruled Bramleigh with a rod of iron, took care to encase it in velvet;

but the Bramleighites knew the iron was there all the same.

The doctor motioned the boy to a seat, and then resumed his work of checking a sheet of figures on the desk before him, while Somerset looked through the window, interestedly watching a couple of pugnacious robins fighting on the lawn.

When the boy presently turned his head he flushed to find the doctor's eyes bent upon him, nor was the searching gaze removed while the master appeared lost in thought.

'You've been breaking rules, Somerset,' commenced Dr. Hedges, after the lapse of a few moments that to the boy seemed an age. 'There appears to have been some extenuating circumstance that apparently satisfies Mr. Denstone, and therefore the breach will not be marked by the punishment that otherwise the infraction of the rules would have merited.'

'Thank you, sir,' Somerset contrived to murmur.

The master turned to his desk and searched among his papers, until he found a half-sheet of note-paper on which were some memoranda in Mr. Denstone's handwriting.

'We find,' resumed the doctor, 'that your studies are too well advanced for your continuance in the Third even for the only one full term that we proposed, and therefore you are being promoted to the Fourth without further delay. Mr. Burnett is making immediate provision for you, and you will transfer yourself to his charge with the commencement of school to-morrow. It would be well for you to call upon him in the meantime.'

For a moment the boy was too surprised to speak. To one of his studious bent, and possessed of an almost

grim determination to get on, earlier promotion than he had anticipated was something to set him in a pleasurable glow.

But there was another side to the shield ! Promotion meant separation from the Fags, and it was a thought that at the moment would scarcely bear contemplation. There was not a boy in Denstone's whom he could not call friend ; he was part and parcel of that intense spirit of comradeship that had made school life well worth living. And he was to be pitchforked into Burnett's, whose habitants, with the exception of Newman and Jenner, had taken no pains to hide their disapproval of him. He would be under the same roof as Boyd, who seemed to view him with altogether inexplicable hatred, and Nisbet, too, only an hour ago, had passed him with a contemptuous stare, as though Somerset's presence was a blot on the earth.

The doctor, however, was evidently awaiting his comment on the announcement, and likes and dislikes had to be pushed into the background for the nonce.

'It is very kind of you, sir,' Somerset said. 'I felt that in some subjects I was rather marking time at Denstone's, but was not worrying about it, as I thought it would but give me a better grounding. I will do my best at Burnett's.'

'I feel sure you will,' the doctor responded. 'Mr. Burnett is very keen on the engineering side ; and if you show any disposition for real work, you will be able to count on him for ready assistance. Now you will be anxious to get off to sports.'

And with his hand upon the boy's shoulder the doctor escorted Somerset to the door and showed him into the hall.

Somerset walked slowly down the steps and across

the Quad, not quite certain where he wished to go. He rather desired to be alone while he considered the upheaval which his world had just suffered.

Of course, now that the Fags had agreed to assist Burnett's in their remaining soccer matches, a truce had been called between the two houses, and really the feud might be considered practically dead.

But Somerset doubted whether the cessation of hostilities would apply in his own particular case. It was very certain that Boyd would not come down out of the seat of the scornful—would in fact view his entrance into the Fourth as an additional affront. His thoughts were broken by a whoop in his rear, and he turned round to see Kerr and Laxton signalling to him.

'Now what's the matter with the child?' asked Kerr, the moment he joined them. 'You look about as happy as a bloater on a grid. I suppose you've heard the rotten bit of news from Burnett's? I had hoped to be the first to tell you.'

Somerset had not expected his elevation to the Fourth would cause any jubilation among the Fags, but he had not judged it would give rise to such irritation as Kerr exhibited. Nor could he quite understand why he should have supposed he would be in a position to make the first announcement.

'Really, it's jolly good for me,' said Somerset, 'if I'm to be in the running for a "Whitworth."'

Kerr and Laxton were viewing him with frank amazement.

'All I can say is I didn't think you would take it so easily,' said Laxton a little severely. 'If I were in your place I should want to punch his head, and shouldn't waste any time in doing it either.'

'Well, it's solely the doctor's fault, I suppose,' replied Somerset. 'One can scarcely punch——'

'What's the Hedgehog got to do with it?' interrupted Laxton. 'We're talking about Burnett's, and particularly that sweep Nisbet; and if you don't feel like tying him up in knots, we feel inclined to do it for you.'

Somerset was surprised at the heat evinced by his chum.

'He's rather an unpleasant sort of chap, I should imagine,' observed Somerset, 'but I'm not worrying myself about him. I'd simply made up my mind to give him as wide a berth as possible, but, of course, it will be more awkward now I'm in Burnett's.'

'Now what is he talking about?' asked Laxton, facing round to Kerr, and then immediately spinning round to fire a reply at Somerset.

'That's just exactly what you're not,' he said. 'It was practically all settled that you should be one of the four to play against Hillchester, when Nisbet put down his foot. He declared he wouldn't play in the same team with you and Newman gave in to him, and asked for the loan of Tranter in your place.'

Somerset perceived that they had been at cross-purposes.

'If it had been Boyd, I shouldn't have been surprised,' put in Kerr. 'He's not playing in any case. Says he'll not kick another ball this season. I'm playing in his place.'

'Did Nisbet express any particular reason for his objection?' inquired Somerset.

'No,' said Laxton. 'We've just been having it out with him. He says he has his reasons, and refuses to say a word further; and for half a pin we would have

nothing to do with assisting Burnett's, and leave them to stew in their own juice.'

'It isn't worth while wrangling afresh over me,' urged Somerset. 'I'd rather not be a bone of contention. It would only mean reviving the wretched feud, and it's best dead.'

The two Fags did not look as though they approved of any conciliatory measures, and were about to express themselves to that effect, but Somerset had not concluded.

'When I said, "I am in Burnett's," you didn't grasp my meaning,' he continued. 'The doctor has promoted me to the Fourth. I commence at Burnett's to-morrow morning.'

'Burnett's?' echoed the two Fags astoundedly.

'Fact,' Somerset assured them. 'I went to the doctor's expecting to receive a wiggling, and got news of promotion instead. Really, I suppose I ought to be a little proud of it, but there are other things to take into consideration. For purely personal reasons I would rather have waited until the general move-up at the end of the summer term, and then some at least of us would go up together.'

'Well, it will mean only being on your lonesome a term and a half,' said Laxton, 'when three-parts of us will be sure to join you.'

'And when we've rejoined him for about ten minutes he'll be moving into the Fifth,' objected Kerr. 'It's the worst of these prodigies.'

'No fear,' laughed Somerset. 'The Fourth will fill my bill for more than a term and a half.'

'It will be a facer for our crowd,' said Kerr. 'One thing is certain, we shall have to give you a send-off. Time is short, and the money-market tight; but we'll

stand you a farewell feed at Niblett's, if we have to pawn our watches.'

'What on earth's the matter with you, Som?' asked Laxton. 'You went positively as white as a sheet for a moment.'

Somerset assured him that he was mistaken, but Kerr's last words had given him quite a jolt, until he perceived it was but a chance expression.

'We'll be sorry to lose you,' said Laxton, 'but, my word, you'll have no bed of roses at Burnett's. I know what I should do if I were you. If Boyd comes the high and mighty, rip into him and give him socks. Nothing else will appeal to him. You've already given him a slight taste, and at the first opportunity you'd better lay it on and knock a ha'porth of manners into him.'

'Well, I'm going to change,' Somerset informed them. 'Lieutenant Hedges is going to try a Brookhurst aeroplane, and I'm anxious to see it.'

'We're going into the village and down to the beach,' said Kerr. 'Boating commences at the end of this week on the river, but not for another month in the bay. See you at tea-time,' he added as he and Laxton went on their way.

It did not take Somerset long to change into tweeds and hurry off to the hangar, where the lieutenant and a couple of mechanics were tuning up the new aeroplane preparatory to making a flight.

The Brookhurst machine was a biplane in which the aviator accomplished all his operations by means of the steering-wheel. Pushing the wheel forward brought the downward rudder into action for descent, while an upward direction was secured by the aviator pulling the wheel towards himself. For righting the machine,

or turning to the right or left, the wheel only needed a twist accordingly.

Presently Lieutenant Hedges and his assistants were satisfied that everything was in order, and then the aviator set out on the first flight at a very low elevation and making circles around the flying-ground. When he had accomplished half a dozen laps, the lieutenant brought the machine gently to rest exactly on the mark.

'She seems to be perfect,' he said, 'and much easier to control than the monoplane. Now, boundary-breaker, climb up. I dared only risk my own neck in an experimental flight, but I think you'll be perfectly safe.'

Somerset needed no second invitation. He was clambering into his seat even before the lieutenant had concluded ; and a very enjoyable flight it was, that did a great deal towards restoring the Fag to a more equable frame of mind, although whether it would be a permanency remained to be proved.

At tea-time the news of Somerset's promotion was common property, and was the subject of general conversation, especially among the boys immediately concerned. The doctor's decision did not seem to please either of the two houses, for what the Fags considered an irreparable loss Burnett's did not appear to view as a corresponding gain, and, what was more, Somerset was only too well aware of the feeling.

He was leaving the hall with almost a dejected air, proposing to do some extra prep. that would perhaps occupy his mind to the exclusion of thoughts concerning Burnett's, when he encountered Barwell.

'What did I tell you?' exclaimed the captain. 'I knew you were in for a surprise. That Berringham

business nearly put a stopper on it, but all's well that ends well.'

'Seems to me it's only just beginning,' replied Somerset gloomily. 'Some of Burnett's are looking black as thunder. I almost wish something would happen to prevent me going up for a time.'

'I dare say I could manage that for you,' said Barwell, with a quizzical smile. 'Young Browning of the Preparatory is in hospital, and is being sent home to-morrow. I'll take you over to see him, and if he breathes on you he'll give you the whooping-cough. Look here,' he added encouragingly, 'let the black looks go hang. You'll hold your own with anybody in Burnett's, or I'll disown you.'

XII

TUCK-SHOP TUMULTS

THE tuck-shop at Bramleigh was a particularly popular institution. The Niblett, husband and wife, considered themselves indispensable to the wellbeing of the school. It was a tradition that Susan was experiencing her second term on earth, in some previous existence having kept a 'tucker' for the budding pro-consuls under the régime of Julius Caesar. In any case, she had been at Bramleigh donkey's years before Jimmy Niblett forsook the army to succeed Susan's father as school porter; and the old soldier considered the daughter as part of the going concern, and forthwith married her.

Niblett's duties were fixed by the authorities as duly constituted, but they by no means marked the sum-total of his energies. There never had been a better splicer of bats; he repaired footballs neatly; he kept the bars, studs, and spikes on boots and shoes in good order; and—tell it not in Gath—for the seniors he was open, for a consideration, to execute commissions that might not always have met with the approval of the Hedgehog.

Jimmy was a lover of animals, fur or feather, wild or tame; and in the little yard at the rear of the lodge was quite a well-stocked menagerie, some of whose occupants were his own, but most of them the pets of various boys, not in all cases the younger ones either

Once upon a time the boys were permitted to keep their pets at the bottom end of the gardens of their respective houses ; but owing to the weird tastes of some enthusiastic naturalists, sentence of banishment was declared upon all live-stock except at Burnett's. Niblett thereupon undertook to house anything from a white mouse upwards upon a rental basis according to the space accommodation, with the result that the menagerie was a concern that realized a handsome dividend, well worth the attention of some myrmidon of the Chancellor of the Exchequer with a thirst for information concerning land values or unearned increment.

The pride and joy of the Niblett household was an alleged bull-terrier of exceedingly doubtful ancestry that put the animal into possession of various characteristics with which no pedigree dog would be willing to be seen in the dark. One outstanding feature in an otherwise white coat was a black patch round one eye, from which originated the family cognomen ' Spot ' ; but the Bramleighites dubbed him ' Chirgwin,' and the dog, a friend of everybody's, answered to both names with easy-going readiness.

When Kerr and Laxton had left Somerset in the early afternoon, they had hied themselves to the ' tucker ' to prepare Susan for a special influx of customers in the evening, which afforded time for extra supplies of varied comestibles to be obtained from Berringham.

The two boys found the good lady in a fluster bordering on distress on account of the absence of Spot from home since breakfast-time ; and, although Niblett had searched for him in all kinds of likely, and also unlikely, places, he was unable to find any trace of him.

The Fags expressed as much sympathy as though a

lost child were in question, and promised to keep a sharp look-out for the truant during their afternoon's peregrinations; but it may be confessed that their minds were so occupied with the news they had just heard from Somerset that they never gave a thought to Spot Niblett.

The promotion of Somerset was a real shock to Denstone's. Although he had been numbered with them so short a time, the Fags felt as if they had known him for years. Of course, in the natural course of events all were looking forward to being domiciled at Burnett's, but to be transferred thereto while the present Fourths were under its roof was viewed as a positive tragedy for the one whom the Hedgehog had delighted to honour.

It would be too much to claim that all the Fags bent their massive minds to an analysis of the emotions stirred by their parting with Somerset; but there was not one of their number unwilling to signalize the event by a tuck-shop orgy for which Kerr had ordered them to assemble; and at the appointed time Niblett's back room was filled to its utmost capacity.

Kerr was a stickler for formality in all things concerning his office as skipper of Denstone's, and he opened the proceedings with a neat little speech in which, on behalf of the Fags, he expressed regret at losing Somerset, accompanied by the hope that he would be happy in his new abode, and promising him the whole-hearted assistance of all present if at any time he desired spots to be knocked off a few scions of Burnett's.

Well, after all, Somerset was not bound for a far country; they would see him every day, even though he were in an alien house, with which his hopes would

eventually be identified, and in which officially they could not imagine themselves taking any interest.

But Niblett's was no place for mental introspection, and promptly the Fags devoted their abundant energy and bubbling spirits to the immediate matter in hand ; and Mrs. Niblett, and a niece called in from the village to assist, speedily were busy in ministering to the needs of the noisy customers.

As there were not sufficient chairs to go round the company, the proceedings constantly assumed a ' general post ' ; for if a boy only stood up to call out an order, somebody at a loose end would instantly slide into his seat. Forthwith would ensue a stern struggle for possession, not unfrequently to find that in the meantime the prize had been annexed by another swashbuckler.

The fun waxed fast and furious. There was only half an hour to go before prep. would interfere with its insistent demand, when Tranter sprung a wheeze upon Susan, and attained a gorgeous success that outdid his wildest expectation.

Tranter minor was the proud possessor of a clock-work rat, whose internal apparatus was constructed upon some principle of perpetual motion, for one winding-up was sufficient to keep it in movement for quite a considerable time. Tranter major happened to have had the toy in order to rectify some slight detail that was out of order, and it was not until after his arrival at the ' tucker ' that he discovered the rat in his pocket. A lull in the noise and a fairly open space in the middle of the floor were seized upon by Tranter as the psychological moment to put his scheme into operation ; and the rat glided across the floor, to disappear behind the chairs in the far corner.

In ordinary circumstances any one of the Fags might have given the toy a kick, but a sudden exclamation from the other side of the counter forbade any such vandalistic interference.

Susan Niblett had observed the progress of the rat. She grabbed her niece with one hand, and with the other she pointed tragically to the black rodent disappearing under a chair, and at once she set up a series of first-class yells that were likely to summon the fire-escape from the Quad.

The Fag behind whose chair the rat had run its silly nose against the wainscot turned the life-like toy with his foot, and consequently it reappeared, making its way towards the counter.

Delirious moments ensued. Susan and her niece promptly scrambled on to the counter. The good lady was quite oblivious to the fact that she had one foot in the middle of the only raspberry sandwich. The jammy concoction provided a very treacherous footing for one whose proportions were ample, and solid to boot, and consequently she subsided and wrecked the contents of the counter.

Meanwhile a few Fourths in the general shop were making frantic efforts to enter the inner room in order to ascertain the cause of the hullabaloo; but the Fags held the door against them for a few seconds, until the opposition prevailed. The door opened, and immediately commenced a wilder racket than ever.

Into the room had sprung a quadruped, dog-like in shape, but coloured a vivid pink, with yellow circles round his eyes that made him the weirdest creature ever seen outside a nightmare.

The rat was making a third pilgrimage across the floor, but the pink monstrosity made short work of its

progression, springing at it and nipping it across the back. Pinkie of the fairies, or hobgoblins rather, did not find the rat to his liking; he dropped it, and the damaged mechanism whirred and squirmed all over the place, quite disconcerting Pinkie, who emitted a series of angry barks.

Poor old Spot—for he was none other—was discovered!

Mrs. Niblett recognized his voice, but was horrified at the guise in which her favourite had returned to the bosom of his family.

At that moment the porter appeared, summoned from quite a distance by the outcries of his good lady, and in his wake appeared the school sergeant.

Jimmy Niblett first extricated Susan from among the wreckage of the counter, and then angrily demanded an explanation from the Fags concerning the outrage upon Spot, which was not forthcoming, since they were quite as much in the dark as the dog's master.

'I'll have the law on somebody,' blurted out Niblett wrathfully. It was astounding the number of threats he proceeded to vent without repeating himself, for normally the porter was rather a tongue-tied man. 'I'll learn somebody. I'll learn him to give—to give my dog——'

'Scarlatina,' suggested Davidson helpfully. 'Got it badly too. He'll want isolating.'

'He wants something worse,' averred Niblett.

'I meant the dog,' explained Davidson.

'And I didn't,' snapped Niblett. 'If I can find out the wretch, it's no isolation I'll give him.'

The porter's looks indicated that 'desolation' more nearly expressed what was in his mind.

Sergeant Crooks, the gym. instructor and drill-sergeant, outside his strictly official duties, viewed himself somewhat as the school policeman, which naturally was not the way to court any large measure of popularity.

'Better leave it in my hands, Niblett,' said the sergeant. 'I'll find the culprit while you're talking about it.'

'Oh, Sherlock Holmes!' exclaimed Kerby. 'Scotland Yard, forward! This way to the pink-dye department and the yellow-ochre stores!'

There was a general laugh at the expense of the sergeant, who cut it short by spinning round and seizing the humorist.

'This was your work!' he exclaimed, pointing dramatically to the canine freak.

'No, it wasn't,' protested Kerby.

Crooks promptly dipped his hand into his captive's jacket pocket, from which he withdrew a pocket-handkerchief liberally bespattered with pink dye, which, by-the-by, almost matched the colour that suddenly suffused the cheeks of the startled Kerby.

'I picked this handkerchief up in the Quad myself half an hour ago,' said the sergeant severely, pointing to a tell-tale monogram. 'I gave it to one of Burnett's servants. Now will you say it wasn't your work?' he said, giving the boy a shake.

'It wasn't work, it was pleasure,' explained Kerby, unabashed, as he wriggled himself out of the sergeant's grasp and made a bolt for the front door.

'How to get the stuff off is the trouble,' said the porter, gazing ruefully at Spot, whose double-dyed pink tail wagged animatedly.

'Easy enough, Niblett,' said Laxton, who dabbled in

chemistry. 'I'll give you a solution that will fetch it off before Chirgwin can wink.' He considered a moment, and added, 'Very likely it will remove the hair too; but what will it matter? It will grow again.'

Niblett had been looking at the young chemist quite hopefully until his concluding words.

'You try it on yourself,' said the porter pointedly. 'I'd a sight sooner have a pink dog than one bald from his head to his tail. Clear the room, sergeant,' he exclaimed.

Niblett desired to soothe Susan's wounded feelings, and also to count up the damage on the counter, which certainly would nullify any hope of profit on the jollification of the Fags.

Out in the general shop the Bramleighites could remain a few minutes longer. Those who did not witness the rumpus in the inner room were curious to learn the origin of it; and the Fags related the details with immense glee, for they considered the incident had put the seal on a most hilarious evening.

Somerset would have subscribed to that view at the moment; but a few minutes later, so far as he was concerned, the evening would end with a very nasty taste in the mouth.

It was Nisbet who introduced the jarring note.

'Just listen to this, you chaps,' he cried, holding up a comic weekly. Ostensibly he was addressing only Burnett's crowd, but his voice carried all over the room, and instantly drew attention:

'One cold night a pawnbroker was roused from his bed by a loud knocking at his door. He threw up the window, and inquired the cause of the disturbance.

"Come down immediately," was the answer. "I want to see you on a matter of great importance."

The pawnbroker partially dressed himself, and hurried down to the door.

"Now, sir, what do you want with me?"

"Please tell me the correct time," was the unexpected reply.

The pawnbroker was exceedingly angry, and threatened to give the inquirer in charge of the police.

"You will do nothing of the kind," replied the man. "I have a perfect right to ask you the time, for you have got my watch."

With pantomimic gesture and varying inflection of voice, Nisbet told the story really well to an audience very ready to be amused; but he had one eye cocked maliciously on Somerset.

'Somebody doesn't seem to think much of it,' he hazarded, fixing Somerset with his eyes, which drew general attention to the Fag; and thus challenged, Somerset was forced to reply.

'Not a bad yarn,' he said, 'but very old—a regular chestnut, in fact.'

'That so?' commented Nisbet, with simulated disappointment. 'I thought it happened only a day or two ago.'

'Now then, gentlemen, if you are gentlemen,' broke in Niblett, 'I'll be called over the coals for keeping you here after time. Goodness knows, I'll be glad to see the last of some of you.'

It happened that Barwell happened to look into the tuck-shop as Nisbet commenced his humorous story. The captain did not disclose himself, as he listened and

realized that Somerset was being roasted very astutely.

On his way home Barwell called at Henderson's, and informed Draycott of the tribulation that still awaited on his unfortunate messenger.

'I wish I were well,' exclaimed the Fiver irritably. 'I'd go over to Burnett's and knock Nisbet's head off. I'd teach him to interfere in my business.'

'Doubtless he doesn't know it was your business,' Barwell reminded him. 'He supposes it was Somerset's.'

'I like the idea of having to explain my private affairs to all Bramleigh,' said Draycott bitterly. 'It's got to be done, though, for Somerset's sake. Thanks very much for the tip, Barwell. I'll see to it.'

Nor did Draycott waste any time. He immediately sent a message to Nisbet, who promptly answered the summons. He knew that relations between Draycott and Boyd were somewhat strained, and possibly by the exercise of a little diplomacy he might now ascertain the reason.

'You've been telling silly yarns about me in the "tucker,"' commenced Draycott, ignoring Nisbet's inquiry after his health. 'Some piffing stuff about pawnshops and watches,' he explained.

Nisbet was surprised at the greeting.

'Nothing of the kind,' he replied promptly. 'I was firing it at Somerset, for I happen to know that last Monday——'

'You know nothing,' interrupted Draycott hotly. 'You haven't got enough sand to keep yourself from slipping. I'll make you wise. Somerset pawned my watch because I couldn't do it for myself. And if you've any objection to my doing what I like with my own, please let me know. Do you understand me, you interfering nincompoop?'

Nisbet perfectly understood that he was up against a very bad snag. Ordinarily Draycott was not easily ruffled ; but when he was really angered he could make himself most unpleasant, being particularly handy with his fists and not scrupling to make full use of his skill.

‘ One more thing,’ Draycott warned him. ‘ If you breathe another word about it, directly or indirectly, I’ll deal with you the moment I’m well enough to get out of doors.’

A little later Nisbet was having it out with Boyd, who had been his informant only a few minutes before the commencement of the fateful meeting at Burnett’s when the Nisbet clique had thrown Boyd over. Since then the couple had not passed a word with each other.

‘ You’ve let me in for a nice thing,’ Nisbet commenced, with a scowl. ‘ About Somerset’s watch, I mean.’

‘ What of it ? ’ asked Boyd.

‘ What of it ! ’ echoed Nisbet sarcastically. ‘ You’ve been up against Somerset ever since he entered the school, and every time you fall foul of him he comes out on top. He dusted you in the little Quad with his fists ; made a guy of you at football. You caught him out of bounds, and very likely would have managed to give him away if it had been necessary ; but he only seems to have got promoted for it. Then you tell me about his visit to Blenkin’s, and I chip him about it ; and as a result I’m in hot water with a senior whose watch Somerset was spouting for him.’

‘ Did you tell him from whom you received the information ? ’ asked Boyd.

‘ Thinking of your own precious skin, of course,’ sneered Nisbet. ‘ I didn’t tell him, but it would have served you jolly well right if I had.’

Heigho ! Somerset was going gloomily to bed for the last time at Denstone's. He certainly appeared little like one who had been the honoured guest of the evening at a complimentary banquet.

He would have felt considerably better could he have heard the passage of arms between Boyd and Nisbet.

XIII

A CRICKET TABLEAU

WHEN Jack Somerset had his first interview with Mr. Burnett, he was exceedingly pleased to gather that the master apparently possessed none of the unpleasant traits that were so characteristic of some of his pupils. He was a dapper little man and a little brusque in manner, and enormously keen on his work ; and it was a great disappointment to him that the present Fourths on the whole showed a most cheerful indifference to their studies. Consequently, as Somerset was coming up with a reputation for considerable ability and a marked aptitude for work, the master was inclined to view him favourably from the outset.

It may be said at once that master and scholar found each other improve on acquaintance ; and if the master were pleased to have gained one who was likely to do him credit, the boy on his part was intensely thankful for the special interest Mr. Burnett evinced in him.

In the circumstances Somerset sadly needed some encouragement, especially in the earlier stages of his residence at Burnett's. Except for Newman and Jenner—and their attitude was merely non-committal—most of the Fourths viewed the promoted Fag with marked aloofness, while the Boyd party was openly scornful.

Although Newman previously had made representations to Kerr against Somerset's inclusion in the quartette of Fags to assist in Burnett's remaining footer engagements, the Fags quite supposed that Somerset's

promotion would cause the objection to be revised. But evidently Nisbet still maintained his opposition, for Newman informed Kerr that they had no intention of utilizing Somerset's services, whereupon the Fags cancelled their promise of assistance.

Newman was at his wit's end. Burnett's were weaker than ever, for not only would Boyd and Pilditch not play, but they persuaded another couple to stand down. The result was that Burnett's lost each of their matches; they were not mere losses, they were *débâcles* that the house would not live down during the present generation.

Being debarred from football was a great disappointment to a keen player like Somerset. The Fags would have liked him to retain his place with them, but it was an unwritten rule that a team should not include fellows in a higher form. The only consolation left to Somerset was the fact that the season had so short a time to run until King Cricket entered into his kingdom.

But just at the last a football plum came Somerset's way. In the last school match of the season against Dellington, Barwell put in the rejected of Burnett's, who not only enjoyed a rattling game, but scored the winning goal after an individual run half the length of the field.

Most of Burnett's happened to witness the match, and some of them expressed their opinion that their house had paid rather a stiff price just to oblige Nisbet's whim.

Nisbet was somewhat of an enigma even to those who knew him best. He was not without several good qualities, but he possessed bad ones that were not only more numerous, but distinctly more obtrusive. While he was slow to make friendships, he was abnormally

quick to take dislikes, and, once taken, he seemed to find a difficulty in revising his opinion, possibly a vein of pigheadedness preventing his acknowledgement that he had been mistaken in his judgement.

In the case of Somerset he took unreasonable objection to him from the first, which lost nothing by his association with the late captain ; but the fact that he had since fallen out with Boyd did nothing towards moderating his dislike of Somerset.

If Burnett's made but a poor show at footer, they could put up a very good cricket eleven. Now Newman and Hollier, the vice, were remarkably keen boating-men, who spent practically all their available spare time on the water, almost to the total exclusion of cricket.

Nisbet, on the other hand, was a willow enthusiast ; he was a sound bat, and almost equally good with the ball. It was only natural that he should become the cricket skipper, which was another misfortune for Somerset.

Nisbet possessed sufficient *savoir faire* not to exhibit any official repugnance to Somerset, and therefore he passed him the compliment of inquiring whether he played cricket.

'I may as well admit that our eleven is practically made up, and the reserves are more than passable,' said Nisbet ; 'but if you care to——'

Although not expressed in so many words, Nisbet was doing his best to intimate that Somerset getting a game was a very remote possibility.

'I don't care to, thanks,' replied Somerset ; and Nisbet, making a remark about the fine weather, with an air as if he were responsible for it, went on his way, satisfied that he had done his official duty in the matter.

Somerset happened to have a study to himself, for Sykes, who had a half share in it, had gone home to be nursed up after a severe attack of gastritis. In the solitude of his own room Jack irritably reviewed the cricket position. He could have cried with vexation. He racked his brain to find some way out of the difficulty ; but he knew full well that Burnett's eleven was irrevocably closed to him.

More to distract his mind from his trouble than anything else, Somerset commenced reading a local weekly newspaper, not that he had ever found much in its pages to interest him. This present was to prove the exception !

It was a very unassuming little paragraph that attracted his attention. The Winston Cricket Club had held its annual general meeting under the presidency of the Rev. John Apsley, who had remarked that they required only one good all-round man to take the place of a player who had removed from the district, and they would enter upon the season with the prospect of improving upon their already good record.

How Somerset wished he might fill the vacancy ! But the village of Winston was three miles away and out of bounds.

But the paragraph served a useful purpose in that it might point a way to get some cricket in spite of Burnett's. He would inquire whether there was a club anywhere around within bounds that would accept him as a member.

The very next day Somerset's star was in the ascendant. He was in the village talking to the postman when there went past a young clergyman to whom the postman touched his cap.

'That's Mr. Apsley, of Winston,' said the man.

'He's an out-and-outer, and none of your high-and-mightiness. You should see him play cricket with the Winston chaps, although he used to play for Oxford, and more than once put up a good score for his home county up north.'

Somerset thought the clergyman was bound for the station, but saw him take a turning that led only to the college. An idea shot into the boy's mind, and he raced after him, introduced himself, and had an animated conversation with him as they sat on a fence just out of sight of the lodge.

'I don't at all see why you shouldn't,' Apsley was saying at the end of twenty minutes, 'especially if you could come by way of a short cut across Lieutenant Hedges' aviation-ground. Hedges would not object if I asked him.'

Somerset assured him that the aviator would prove no obstacle.

'Very well,' said Apsley. 'I'm paying a call on Mr. Burnett. He and my eldest brother are old Varsity chums, and I've no doubt I can persuade him to fall in with our wishes. If you'll look out for me on my return, I'll be able to tell you the result.'

Needless to say Somerset waited.

Nearly an hour passed before the clergyman reappeared, and even before he was near enough for words the boy knew from his face that the mission had proved successful.

'Thanks to the way you are sticking to your work,' said the clergyman, 'I don't think Burnett will refuse you anything in reason. You can play for Winston on any Saturday or Wednesday half. More than that, he will not mention it to anybody, so that it is up to you to devise means of keeping the rest of the house in

ignorance. I rather fancy Burnett himself would prefer it kept a secret. I don't know what is at the back of his mind, but he certainly gave me that impression.'

After a little more general conversation Apsley held out his hand.

'*Au revoir*, Mr. A. N. Other,' he said. 'Remember 2.30 on Saturday.'

'I shan't be able to forget for dreaming of it,' was the reply.

On succeeding Saturdays and Wednesdays Somerset was not to be found in the Bramleigh playing-fields. On other evenings he sometimes watched the first eleven at the nets, but generally he went to the river or down to the bay.

As the weeks slipped away Somerset found life in Burnett's far more endurable. Newman and Jenner were at last openly friendly, and a few other boys followed their example. Having accomplished so much, Jack could afford to laugh at Boyd's pinpricks. Pilditch was no longer actively unpleasant, for once Somerset lost his temper and informed the ex-captain's jackal that he was a candidate for a wholesome hammering unless he mended his ways; and as Pilditch was an utter coward at heart, he used his discretion and acted upon the warning. And if Nisbet were getting any pleasure from keeping him out of the cricket eleven, Somerset was quite content not to interfere with his satisfaction.

Of course, Somerset's bi-weekly disappearances were sometimes the subject of comment; but as he generally cycled off in the direction of the flying-ground, it was supposed that his interest in aeroplanes was growing into an actual craze.

This season the fame of the Winston Club was

growing apace, and their doings were closely followed in the local weekly, especially to note what Apsley might have done. But shortly it was obvious that Winston's star performer was really Mr. A. N. Other; for although he did not always equal Apsley's score, he was evidently a deadly bowler.

On the second Saturday in July the Bramleigh eleven had a match fixed with Hillebester, who had to cry off on account of the governor's sitting on that day an old scholar who had risen to great eminence in the political world. Barwell set about to fix up another match in its place, and accounted himself lucky in being able to arrange with Winston, who also had unexpectedly found themselves without a match.

The new fixture caused quite a flutter at Bramleigh, and the enthusiasts were discussing the prospects of the school for days before the event.

Winston arrived at Bramleigh with only ten men, and Barwell asked Apsley whether he would require a substitute, only to be assured that the eleventh player would be sure to put in an appearance.

'As a matter of fact, Mr. Other is rather looking forward to meeting you,' said Apsley; and Mr. Burnett might have been seen to turn his head to hide a smile.

'And we are anxious to meet him,' responded Barwell. 'We hope to spoil his average for him. He's got several wonderful bowling analyses to his credit.'

Apsley and Barwell tossed, the former winning and electing to bat.

The school took the field. The scorers had already been informed that the incoming batsmen would be Mr. Apsley and A. N. Other. Presently two figures emerged from the visitors' side of the pavilion. One was Apsley without a doubt; his companion apparently

was a mere stripling. Surely this was not the local celebrity?

Why, it was none other than Somerset, late of the Fags, who had not touched a bat this season—possibly in no other season! Apsley had picked him up as a substitute. He must be off his rocker to make such a crass selection when the school's reserves and the best of Burnett's were available.

Boyd and Nisbet were particularly indignant, and the former addressed himself to one of the Winston men, who at that moment came out of the dressing-room to watch their first couple make a start.

'Why ever did your skip select that chap to go in with him?' asked Boyd of the nearest man, who happened to be a strapping young farmer.

'Why shouldn't he?' was the reply. 'There aren't much to choose between passon and Mr. Other. This last month the young gentleman has come along at a fine pace. He'll be up to county form afore he be much older.'

'I'm speaking of the one taking middle,' answered Boyd. 'He's simply swanked your skip into taking him on as a sub.'

'Not much sub. 'bout him,' the Winston yeoman replied. 'I tell 'e Mr. Other be hot stuff if he be in form. There he goes,' cried the man, 'four for first hit, just to get his hand in.'

Boyd and Nisbet looked volumes at each other as they endeavoured to grasp this unthinkable, unbelievable thing that had happened, and in moody silence they awaited the result of the first over. Barwell was the bowler, and a very good half-dozen balls he sent down.

The first ball Mr. A. N. Other promptly smacked to the boundary, the second and third he smothered,

the fourth yielded a couple, the fifth the batsman put to slip, but it was fielded smartly, and to the sixth Other opened his shoulders and put the ball on the roof of the pavilion.

'Ten off my first over, you secretive young blighter,' whispered Barwell as he passed the batsman at the change over. 'I'll have something to say to you later for keeping me in the dark.'

Carrington took the ball at the other end, and was highly delighted to get Apsley smartly stumped off his second delivery. The incoming man scored a single, and Other gave scant ceremony to the three remaining balls, scoring two couples, and again sending the last ball to the boundary.

Even if A. N. Other achieved nothing better, he had not done badly to knock up 18 off the nine balls he had received.

The Bramleigh spectators had now got over their initial surprise, and settled down to watch A. N. Other's wonderfully crisp style. Frequently his hits drew hearty applause, especially from the Fags, who were intensely amused at the discomfiture of Burnett's. Kerr and Laxton strolled over to where the Fourths were congregated. 'Is it your Somerset, our old Somerset, or the *Other Somerset* who is laying on Barwell and Carrington?' inquired Laxton blandly. 'You are good judges of cricket at Burnett's.'

With the exception of A. N. Other, none of the visitors made any great show against Barwell and Carrington, who bowled almost throughout. The innings closed for 120, of which the Bramleigh-cum-Winston man accounted for a creditable 66.

The Bramleighites on the whole were not inclined to view their task as a very formidable one. Twice

recently Barwell and Carrington had each passed the century. In one match they ran up nearly 300 between them and then declared, and fetched out their opponents for 80.

Further speculation ceased as Winston took the field; and as 'Other' Somerset commenced sending down a few trial balls, it was evident that he was one of the opening bowlers.

Barwell and Carrington came in, and amid a tense silence around the ground 'Other' Somerset prepared to send down to the Bramleigh captain. He took an apparently inordinately long loping run, and then the ball shot down the pitch as though ejected from a catapult. Barwell met it with a perfectly straight bat, as he did the three succeeding balls. The fifth he square-cut beautifully, but owing to smart fielding it only realized a single; and thus Carrington received the last ball of the over, which beat him completely, uprooting the middle stump and threatening to cut short the useful life of the wicket-keeper.

Bankier joined his skipper, and between them they managed half a dozen runs during the succeeding over, which ended with Barwell again facing the lightning deliveries of 'Other' Somerset.

The first one Barwell misjudged completely. Apparently it was off the wicket on the on-side, but it broke in and spread-eagled the wicket.

Disaster was in the air! The school's two invincibles were out, and the board only showed seven runs.

Forrest came in, and slammed the ball to mid-on for a couple. He endeavoured to treat the next ball similarly, but mid-on shot out a hand at the ball. It was a stinger, but he held it and closed Forrest's meteoric career. Perks joined Bankier, and the score rose

slowly to the half-century, although only a fraction of the runs were made off 'Other' Somerset. Bankier left at 56, and Perks at 64.

'Other' Somerset got seriously to work shortly, and in one over he performed the hat-trick, clean bowling Fullwood, Draycott, and Hylton with balls which they declared they never saw.

Quite unexpectedly Myddleton and Todhunter made a stand that yielded 21, and the innings closed for 90.

As the Winstonites returned to the pavilion Carrington addressed Somerset good-humouredly.

'You're a wonderful merchant, you are,' he said. 'Sixty-six runs and six wickets for 21 isn't at all bad. You seem to make a habit of springing surprises on folk.'

'Not a habit, it's a hobby,' corrected Barwell.

XIV

A TELEPHONE CALL

JACK SOMERSET's cricket triumph in itself appealed to Bramleigh's inherent sportsmanship, to which was added admiration of the boy's dogged determination to take part in a favourite pursuit, still further capped by the dramatic manner in which he made his appearance on the home ground to vindicate his claim to inclusion among the best cricket company the school could boast.

Somerset would have been more than human—and there was no more intensely human boy in all Bramleigh—if he had not experienced at least a little malicious desire 'to rub it in' to Nisbet. Upon second thoughts he forbore, and presently was pleased that he had exercised restraint.

Nobody round the Bramleigh ground had been more frankly amazed at Somerset's exhibition than Nisbet; and it needed not the comments of a few candid friends, especially Newman and Hollier—who, as non-cricketers, could view the matter more dispassionately—to cause Burnett's cricket skipper to devote himself to a little heart-searching.

In the end his mental pendulum swung back, and he decided to make the *amende honorable* to 'Other' Somerset, hoping that the latter would not bear malice and would let him down as lightly as possible.

Nisbet explained his errand rather shamefacedly, and with a very unusual loss for words. Somerset listened gravely, but made no attempt to help him out;

and his visitor stammered and floundered until he lost patience with himself and speech came with a gush.

'You've got me on toast,' he blurted out, 'and you know it. You've spoofed us all ends up. I've been an utter ass. Somehow I commenced by misunderstanding you, and that accounts for everything. I want to be friends, and—and—will you play for Burnett's?'

Possibly there was a flicker of amusement in Somerset's eyes that suggested he had anticipated the question.

'I know what you're thinking,' exclaimed Nisbet. 'I really want to be friends, and I'd willingly stand down myself to see you in our house eleven. Now will you believe?'

'I'm perfectly willing to believe, and I never wished to be anything but friends,' said Somerset. 'But I can't play for Burnett's. It wouldn't be fair to throw up Winston, and I'm playing for the school on Wednesdays.'

'Oh!' jerked out Nisbet regretfully. 'Barwell snapped you up while I've been thinking about it.'

'As a matter of fact, he booked me at the end of the third over,' acknowledged Somerset, with a happy laugh. 'If I happen to have a free day and you are hard up for a player, you can count on me.'

'We shall be hard up on Saturday week,' replied Nisbet; 'but I suppose it won't be my luck to get you. It's the return with Seadown, and on their ground they played skittles with us.'

Somerset reflected for a moment. He took from his pocket a fixture-card to ascertain Winston's opponents for the date mentioned, and found it to be the easiest match of the season. He decided that Mr.

Apsley would be willing to spare him in the circumstances.

'You can rely on me against Seadown,' announced Somerset.

'It's awfully sporting of you,' said Nisbet, 'for not turning me down completely'; and he went off to report the result of his interview with 'Mr. A. N. Other.'

If Somerset were not now happy, he would have been uncommonly hard to please; for, except Boyd and Pilditch, those at Burnett's who had cold-shouldered him were now tumbling over each other in the endeavour to make friends with him, just by way of proving that nothing succeeds like success.

If the boy had put on airs, there would have been every natural excuse for it; but he went on his unassuming way with a very full programme of work and play, each of which brought their own resultant joys.

It happened that Somerset made a most inauspicious début for the school against Plymington on the Wednesday half following the great sensation. He went in to bat in partnership with Barwell. He received the first ball of the match—and it proved his last, for he completely misjudged it, and an ominous click in his rear intimated to him how transient may be the batsman's glory.

Nobody on the school side did more than passably well, and the total score only amounted to 120.

When Plymington went to the wickets Somerset took ample revenge for his batting failure. The visitors could only put up 95, and most of those they made off Barwell and Carrington. Somerset they found too much for them, as evidenced by his six wickets for 27.

In Saturday's match at Winston Somerset atoned

for his duck of three days earlier by compiling 45 without a chance ; for the school on the next Wednesday half he made just half a century ; and he shared in the bowling honours on each occasion.

The following Saturday, the day of Burnett's match with Seadown, happened to be Boyd's sixteenth birthday, and the receipt of a five-pound note from Squire Jocelyn put him in high good humour ; and in a burst of unusual generosity he announced his intention of giving Burnett's a feed if they could score a win over Seadown. A few minutes later it occurred to him that if victory did await them, he could not omit Somerset from the promised feast unless he wished the rest of the eleven to taboo it.

The Seadown fellows arrived, and brought a goodly crowd with them ; and as neither the Fags nor the school were specially engaged, a good number of spectators encircled the pitch.

Nisbet and Somerset opened the batting, and quite early in the game Burnett's were in deep tribulation. Nisbet returned to the pavilion in the first over, and four others followed him there at painfully short intervals ; and if they had stayed longer at the wickets than their skipper, they had made shocking bad use of their time. The score proved it to demonstration.

Whew ! Only 40 runs, and six wickets down !

Somerset, being most anxious to make runs to-day, played over-carefully, merely smothering balls that ordinarily he would have slammed to the boundary. But with half the team out for 40, and Boyd for a partner, Somerset seemed to have a sudden accession of confidence, and commenced to give some firework effects that shattered the gloom of Burnett's supporters

while the Seadown bowlers began to exhibit signs of panic.

In three overs 'Other' Somerset helped himself to 38 runs, 16, 10, and a dozen respectively. Boyd entered into the spirit of the game with an amenableness most unexpected, and snatched every opportunity to give his partner the lion's share of the bowling.

With the idea of checking 'Other' Somerset's levity, the visiting skip put on a lob bowler, which only added to the Bramleigh gaiety. As a result of the first ball the pavilion lost a large pane of glass; another was lifted out of the ground, dropping into the road and drawing some highly picturesque, albeit florid, remarks from a passing carter.

But it was the last ball of the over that provided still more excitement. It was slow, well up, and, although off the wicket, quite likely to break in if it were allowed time. 'Other' Somerset went out to meet it, and smote it a couple of feet off the ground.

It was unfortunate that Sergeant Crooks had elected that moment to take a short cut across the corner of the pitch, for the ball dropped with a thud almost at his feet and ricocheted off his ankle to somewhere just over the boundary-line. Uttering a yell, the sergeant sprang into the air, and the remarks he made in an unguarded and delirious moment caused him to sink considerably in the estimation of Mr. Burnett, who overheard him.

The visiting captain decided to strike lobs off the bill of fare. If it had been left to the school sergeant, he would have taken the batsman off.

In the next over Boyd was snapped at the wicket. He had only made a dozen runs; but he had rendered 'Other' Somerset invaluable assistance, and the couple

smiled quite amiably at each other as Boyd retired. None of the succeeding Fourths made any show, the innings closing for 140, 'Other' Somerset carrying out his bat for only five short of the century.

Although Seadown had not expected Burnett's would reach a hundred, they entered upon their task with fairly light hearts; but the innings had not proceeded far before they were cast down in deepest gloom.

'Other' Somerset, they found, was practically unplayable; and if they had been unable to snatch a few runs off Nisbet, the whole side would not have amassed a couple of dozen runs amongst them. The deadly young bowler did not accomplish the hat-trick, but he was precious near it on three occasions, for at one stage of the game he took a couple of wickets with successive balls in three successive overs.

Seadown only compiled 48, and 'Other' Somerset could post up in his cricket diary, 'Seven wickets for 14.'

Nisbet warmly complimented Somerset on his performance, and thanked him for his assistance.

'It was a pity some of our chaps didn't help you more, so that you could have got the century,' he said. 'Boyd was the only one of 'em who played the right game.'

'Yes,' interrupted Boyd, 'some of those short runs we sneaked were teasers.'

And he smilingly appealed to Somerset for confirmation.

'We got on capitally, and understood each other perfectly,' agreed Somerset, while he thought it was a pity it could not be said of matters other than cricket.

'Well, bear in mind we've won that feed you

promised this morning,' cried Dennis. 'We're holding you to it.'

Somerset glanced round from one to the other. It was the first he had heard of anything particular depending on the result.

'My birthday,' said Boyd, affably addressing himself to Somerset. 'I'm giving a do at Niblett's in joint honour of my natal day and the victory over Seadown. You'll make one, of course?'

One might have pushed Somerset over with a feather. If he only played for Burnett's once or twice more, Boyd would be falling on his neck and kissing him.

'Very pleased,' replied Somerset. He was not quite sure that he wished to be under any obligation to Boyd; but he could not refuse, unless he desired to be viewed as a boor.

'Oh, my aunt!' whispered Jenner to Nisbet. 'Are things what they seem, or are wisions about? Boyd's as proud as a cat with two tails over his share in the match. Listen to him chumming up to Somerset instead of wanting to cut his throat!'

'Too good to last,' murmured Nisbet. 'There'll be a slump in his friendliness by to-morrow morning—perhaps sooner.'

On his way to Burnett's to change, Niblett met Somerset, and handed him a telegram which had just arrived. He tore it open and read:

'Ring up 159 Berringham.'

The message bore no signature. Who was it from? What did it mean? Was it a rag?

Somerset remembered that he only knew one person by name in Berringham, and it was a name he rather wished he had never heard.

At that moment Somerset espied Draycott crossing

the Quad to Henderson's. He hailed him with a whistle, and the senior faced about and walked towards him.

Somerset handed him the telegram to read.

'What's it about?' inquired Draycott.

'I don't know,' answered Somerset. 'I was wondering whether it's from—from——'

'Cough it up,' urged Draycott.

'I thought perhaps it was from Mr. Blenkin,' Somerset said with a rush.

'Very likely,' agreed Draycott. 'He's anxious to say he made a mistake and I can have another five. I don't think! Oh, and couldn't I just do with it!'

'Well, hadn't you better ring him up?' asked Somerset.

'No fear,' exclaimed Draycott. 'Of course it isn't Blenkin; and if it were, I wouldn't waste sixpence on him. He's a pirate, a bushranger, and—a lot of other things. I wouldn't mind being rung up for his funeral, but all else I'm giving him a miss.'

'What am I to do?' inquired Somerset anxiously. 'There's nobody in all the world who would want to speak to me except father, and he's in Australia, or my brother, and he's at Aldershot.'

'Perhaps it's a sister,' suggested Draycott, with a wry smile.

'Haven't got one,' replied Somerset.

'Somebody else's sister,' suggested Draycott. 'Perhaps she wished to present a bouquet or a laurel wreath to Mr. A. N. Other.'

'Drop it. I'm serious,' said Somerset, on an aggravated note.

'So am I, awfully, beastly serious,' laughed the senior. 'I have an idea. I'll ring up for you, and if

it's some fair hero-worshipper I'll charge you double for the call, and will go over and see her myself for another half-dollar. Now friendship can't say fairer than that.'

'Yes, you ring up,' agreed Somerset avidly.

'Come with me to Henderson's, and we'll get through in a few minutes,' said Draycott; and they hastened off together.

'We're in the Berringham area,' said the senior when they reached the telephone cabinet. 'Let's look up the Berringham directory—it's bound to be a short one—and find out who is 159.'

He turned over a few pages, and then ran a finger down a column.

'Hen and Chickens Hotel,' he said presently. 'No. 159 is the swellest hotel in the town. Old Blenkin is 88.' He took down the receiver.

'I'm glad it isn't Blenkin,' said Somerset while they waited; 'but what's the hotel want with me?'

'I suppose you called there and went off without paying your score,' quizzed Draycott. 'I'll never be surprised at anything you do. I don't suppose the hotel folks know anything about it. The call is from a visitor or—or—goodness knows who it is.' He signed to Somerset not to speak.

'Hallo!' he said into the transmitter. 'Yes, this is Bramleigh School. Who are you, and whom do you want?'

Draycott listened a moment, and then said, 'Your brother isn't at Aldershot; he's in Berringham.'

With an exclamation of joy the boy seized the receiver, announced himself to the speaker at the other end, and listened with glowing face, while his companion watched amusedly.

'Yes, yes—won't I just! I can get permission, I'm sure. There's a train at five, and I can just catch it. Ta-ta!'

Somerset replaced the receiver, and turned to Draycott.

'Jolly lucky we wiped off Seadown so early,' he said. 'I hope Mr. Burnett will not be crusty, but I simply must go to Berringham. My brother can't come here, and he is leaving by the night express for London.'

'Oh you go!' cried Draycott. 'Burnett will not refuse in the circumstances. Good luck!'

On his way to Burnett's the excited boy ran into Boyd.

'Awfully sorry,' he exclaimed, 'but I can't attend the feed at Nettles. I'm going to meet my brother at Berringham, if I can get permission.'

Somerset shot into the house, and Boyd looked after him with a scowl on his face.

'And what's his brother doing in Berringham, I wonder?' he murmured.

XV

IT'S A GAY WORLD

' I WANT to ask a favour, sir, a great favour.'

Mr. Burnett looked at Somerset kindly, quite assured that he would find it difficult to refuse, whatever it was.

' Will you permit me to spend the evening in Berringham? ' asked Somerset timidly.

The master's face underwent a marked change, and a shadow appeared to enter the smiling eyes.

' I wouldn't ask if I were you,' said Mr. Burnett regretfully. ' I feel sure that Dr. Hedges would not approve. So short a time has elapsed, and——'

Somerset groaned, as he feared his last visit to Berringham would now prove a bar to the gratification of his present wild desire. Was he never going to escape the consequences of that ill-starred business?

' Tell me all about it,' said the master kindly, struck by the misery in Somerset's face, which showed that there was more than a mere whim at the back of the request.

Somerset poured out the details—his surprise at the sudden call, his anxiety to meet Wilton, whom he had only seen once since last November.

Mr. Burnett asked a few questions, and the shadow chased from his eyes.

' Yes, you may go,' he said. ' I'll take the responsibility without delaying to get the doctor's approval, for I know he has gone to the rectory to tea.'

' Until what time, sir? ' asked the boy anxiously.

Mr. Burnett hesitated a moment.

'Being market-day there's an extra train,' he said. 'It leaves Berringham at 8.45. Be sure and not miss it. You will be able to be with your brother until almost the last minute, for the night mail to London leaves at 8.55.'

'You're awfully good,' exclaimed the boy; and a moment later he was darting upstairs.

Somerset duly caught the five o'clock train, which occupied forty-five minutes on the journey, as it called at all intervening stations.

No sooner had the train left Bramleigh than he regretted he had no opportunity of telling Barwell the good news. In all probability the captain would have run over to Berringham himself, just to say 'How d'ye do?' to Wilton, whom he had met several times at Brookhurst.

But it occurred to Somerset that even if he had wished to inform Barwell it would have been impossible, for the captain had left school before midday, going somewhere to witness a tennis tournament.

Somerset arrived at Berringham, and hurried out of the station. He was asking an outside porter to direct him to the Hen and Chickens, when a hand fell on his shoulder, and a voice exclaimed:

'Out of bounds again, and I've caught you on the hop. I should have thought you'd had enough of Berringham.'

It was Barwell, who was hurrying into the station to catch the 5.50 to Bramleigh.

Somerset mischievously decided to allow the captain to think the worst, and assumed a dogged, guilty air.

'I hope you've not been playing the giddy goat,' said Barwell. 'I'll feel better if you assure me that the doctor has given you permission.'

'If the Hedgehog had spotted me instead of you, he would probably have had an apoplectic stroke,' replied Somerset. 'At the present moment I don't suppose he has the remotest idea I'm out of Bramleigh.'

'Then you're going back with me, you young ass,' declared Barwell, seizing him by the arm.

'Help!' shouted Somerset.

'Shut up, you blithering sweep!' the captain warned him. 'When I get you into a carriage I'll knock some sense into you.'

Barwell did not know that an intensely interested spectator was only a few yards in his rear. He had perceived the couple from the front steps of the hotel, and had walked over to join them.

The boy was aware of it, and hence his appeal for assistance.

'Hi, Wilton!' he cried. 'Lend me a hand against this brigand.'

The captain shot round to meet the amused eyes of Lieutenant Somerset. Barwell held out a hand, but did not release his captive.

'Awfully glad to see you, Somerset,' he said. 'But this young imp has broken bounds to meet you, and there'll be a most unholy row if he's found out.'

The lieutenant's smile faded into concern.

'What possessed you, Jack, to break bounds?' he commenced. 'You told me you could get permission.'

'Rather ask what possesses him to stuff you up with his suspicions,' retorted Somerset minor, making a *moue* at the captain.

Barwell at once suspected the Fourth had been pulling his leg.

'Just explain,' he said, giving Somerset a shake, 'and put my mind at rest.'

'You asked whether the doctor had given me permission,' said Somerset. 'If you had substituted Burnett——'

Barwell interrupted him with another shake that nearly made his teeth rattle, and addressed himself to the elder.

'He's the kind of image I have to endure, only there's six score or more of 'em. Bossing a company of Blankshires is child's play to it. Managing wagon-loads of monkeys is about equal to my job.'

Lieutenant Somerset was viewing his brother with affectionate amusement.

'I'm glad it's all right,' he said to Barwell, 'and I'm pleased to have met you so unexpectedly. Now suppose you come over with us to my room at the Hen and Chickens.'

'I'll be very glad to come later on,' replied the captain, as he pleaded several calls he had to make, in order to give the brothers some time to themselves.

'What leave have you got?' he asked Jack.

'Return by the 8.45,' was the answer.

'It's six o'clock now,' said Barwell, looking up at a clock. 'I'll call for you at eight.'

The captain went off with a wave of the hand, and the Somersets crossed the road to the hotel.

'Didn't I spoof Barwell a treat?' asked the younger as they entered the lieutenant's room. 'And it isn't easy to do as a rule. Now tell me what stroke of luck brings you to Berringham.'

It was a simple matter. A couple of deserters were under arrest at Berringham. Ordinarily a corporal would have brought down a file to escort the delinquents back to barracks; but the lieutenant had elected to take the corporal's place in the hope of seeing his brother.

'I'm sorry for the poor chaps,' said the boy; 'but it would have been better if they had been caught separately, and then we could have had a couple of confabs.'

The brothers were good correspondents, but in only a few minutes they could say more than would occupy a dozen letters. They could give details of incidents that had to be omitted on paper, and thus the verbal and written accounts differed as chalk from cheese.

The boy chattered on, relating his sorrows and his joys; and the elder rejoiced to learn that the joys now appeared to predominate.

'Strange your chief bogy should be named Boyd,' mused the lieutenant. 'Same name as a beggar who has done his utmost to drive me out of the Blankshires. Your chap appears to be coming round, you say; but mine is going from bad to worse.'

'I don't worry more than I can help about my Boyd,' replied Jack. 'I've got practically all the school on my side, and I can afford to laugh at him, whatever spiteful thing he might attempt.'

'I'm not so well off, unfortunately,' said his brother. 'Lieutenant Boyd influences some of the other sub-alterns, and I've not won half my battle. Still, it's good to learn you've come out on top, and maybe it's a happy augury for me.'

The conversation veered round to their father. Mr. Somerset had reached Australia, and was making a stay of considerable length in Melbourne, where he was carrying out some negotiations for the Brookhurst Aviation Company. From his letters to his elder son it appeared that the voyage had greatly improved his health, and a Melbourne physician foretold a complete recovery in time.

'One bit of news I haven't told you yet,' said the lieutenant presently. 'I've had a stroke of luck. I've won £50, and it will come in jolly useful, for the governor's allowance does little more than cover my bare expenses in the Blankshires.'

'You don't mean that you've—you've been—' said Jack hesitatingly, and finally breaking off without completion.

The elder gleaned his meaning.

'No,' he replied. 'Nothing to do with gambling or betting. I see a great deal of both, but I've steered clear so far. The governor put me on my honour, and, of course, that settles it. I wouldn't back a horse that was a real dead certainty. I wouldn't stake on a nap hand all trumps from the ten upwards.'

Jack laughed outright at the examples.

'There'd be no gamble in either case,' he said, with a grin. 'Dead robbery would describe it better. - But how did you win the money? Was it a missing-word competition or football-results coupons, or what?'

'They're mild gambles of a kind,' his brother reminded him. 'Rather harmless and inane perhaps, but easily leading to the real thing. No, I landed my prize by a literary effort. The *Regimental Argus* offered £50 for the best article on "A Day's Work in the Life of a Foot Soldier." I entered under a nom de plume and an accommodation address. I landed the prize, and received the money only yesterday.'

'Jolly good,' exclaimed Jack. 'If you don't send me a copy of the paper, I'll never forgive you. What do the Blankshires think about it?'

'Nothing,' replied the lieutenant, horrified at the suggestion. 'I should be ragged to death. As a literary effort it would be ridiculed, while the idea of

pen-pushing for money would raise up no end of scorn and contempt. You see, many of the Blankshires were born with silver spoons in their mouths. They don't know the real value of money. I would rather sacrifice the £50 than let the mess know I had won it.'

'You send me a copy, and I shall be proud of it,' averred Jack.

'I'm going to give you a share of the prize,' announced his brother. 'I dare say you would consider a fiver a handsome tip.'

'Do you mean a five-pound note or just five bob?' asked Jack anxiously.

'Pounds, my boy,' replied the lieutenant.

'I should consider it a miracle, not a tip,' said Jack with quite solemn assurance.

'Well, I'll act the wonder-worker before you go. Please see that I don't forget.'

'On your life, you bet it'll not be allowed to slip your memory,' was the breezy reply.

The clock on the mantelshelf commenced chiming the hour just as the door was knocked and Barwell entered.

The brotherly confidences were at an end; but the conversation was thoroughly enjoyable, especially to Lieutenant Somerset, who led the Bramleigh captain to tell not a few incidents in which Somerset minor had figured, and which the boy's own innate modesty had caused him to repress or touch on very lightly.

At half-past eight the trio reluctantly arose. The lieutenant had to call at the hotel office to pay his bill, Jack and Barwell standing a few yards away waiting for him. As he came towards them he was putting some money into his pocket, but to Jack he handed a piece of paper that crinkled.

The boy opened it out as if to convince himself of its reality, and then stowed it in an inside pocket.

Barwell could not help but recognise the value of the note. He held out his hand to the soldier with a laugh.

'If you've got another to chuck away, don't be shy about it,' he said. 'There's no false pride about me.'

Lieutenant Somerset knew that Barwell was not likely to be in very great want of money. He was an only son, and money fairly plentiful at home.

A few minutes later Jack Somerset and Barwell were at a railway carriage door, and the lieutenant was snatching the last few words with them. Twenty yards farther along the platform stood the escort, four Blankshire privates, with a couple of dejected individuals in charge.

Jack leant out of the window waving his hand to his brother as long as he could see him. He sat back in his seat, and exclaimed:

'I've had a ripping day, a really clinking match and a wind-up with good old Wilton. This old world of ours isn't such a bad sort of a crib after all.'

'I suppose not,' agreed the captain, 'especially when you've got a brother you can touch for a fiver.'

'Not a word,' Jack warned him. 'It's a secret.'

It was half-past nine when the couple reached the Quad, and Barwell bade the Fourth good-night. There was no need to hurry into Barnett's for a few minutes, and therefore Jack decided to pay a flying visit to Draycott just to tell him how he had enjoyed himself.

'Lucky bounder,' said the Fiver. 'Nobody rings me up. You didn't think to call on old Blenkin, I suppose? That fiver which he didn't fork out is worrying me to death. Now if you could lend me a

five-pun' note I'd call you blessed, and remember you in my prayers. I shall go clean dotty before I'm three days older.'

'I suppose you've been betting again or card-playing, and have got deeper into the mire,' hazarded Somerset in tones of mingled reproof and regret.

'You suppose wrongly,' replied Draycott gloomily. 'I've learnt my lesson, thank you. If I can only once get out of the hole, I'll swear off gambling for ever.'

'And would £5 be sufficient to clear you?' asked Somerset.

'Absolutely,' was the reply. 'But what's the good of talking?'

'Not much,' agreed Jack; 'but I'll lend you a fiver if you promise on your honour to give up gambling. You're too good a chap to be worried out of your life with the rotten business.'

He was holding out a five-pound note as he spoke.

Draycott's head throbbed. His poor brain scarcely seemed able to cope with such an utterly unexpected possibility. He gasped like a fish out of water. He took hold of the note gingerly, as though he expected it would bite him. He stroked it tenderly.

'I can't understand this legerdemain business,' he said weakly. 'Are you going to produce another out of your socks or fish one out of the back of my neck? Perhaps you use these crinkly things as pocket-handkerchiefs. Oh! I give it up. I want to kiss your baby brow. Hang it all, I want to cry. I want to——'

'Talk sense,' interrupted Somerset, who could realize Draycott's intense gratitude, and the feeling of relief he was endeavouring to swamp with affected humour. 'Do you pledge your honour?' he asked.

'I don't like the word—it's too beastly reminiscent,'

said Draycott gravely ; ' but I'd pledge myself to you and no 25 per cent. to pay for it either. On my honour I've done with gambling for good and all.'

' That's all right,' said Somerset. ' If you keep your word I shall be glad to have helped you, even if you never paid me back.'

' I shall pay you at the commencement of next term, my boy—that also on my honour,' Draycott assured him. ' It will be done if I have to lift the baby grand from home and sell it on my way to school.'

' Good-night,' exclaimed Somerset. ' Burnett will be thinking I've missed the train.'

Even before Somerset was out of the house Draycott was carolling a mirthful ditty. He was not quite certain of the tune, and some of his notes would have distressed a sensitive ear. Possibly that was why Todhunter shortly was protesting at the door.

' You've been like a sick owl all the evening,' said Tod, ' and now you're making a noise like a duet between an asthmatical rook and a creaking cart-wheel.'

' Ah, you're a dull soul, Tod, my lad,' answered Draycott. ' You've no ear for the music of a heart rejoicing. You're just the wormiest of bookworms. Good-hearted in the main, but a worm all the same. It's a gay world, and I'm the gayest of the gay.'

XVI

A FIVE-POUND NOTE ASTRAY

It was just striking ten when Somerset reached Burnett's, and he had scarcely entered his study when Newman looked in.

'Nice to be some folks gallivanting out of bounds on a Saturday night,' he said. 'I heard you went to meet a soldier brother.'

'Yes, he's a subaltern in the Blankshires,' Somerset informed him, looking up from unlacing his shoes.

'That's jolly funny,' remarked Newman interestedly. 'You and Maurice Boyd at Burnett's, and your brother and Gerald Boyd in the Blankshires. It's quite a coincidence.'

Somerset thought that it was a greater coincidence than occurred to Newman, but he didn't translate it into words. He was thinking of what Wilton had told him.

'I guess you had a gorgeous time at Niblett's,' suggested Somerset.

'Guess again,' Newman advised him. 'The feed fizzled out.'

'You don't mean to say Boyd went back on his promise?' said Somerset in a tone of astonishment. 'It was a good win, and he really did well himself. After the match he seemed particularly pleased.'

'Of course, you know nothing about the rumpus,' said Burnett's captain reflectively. 'It happened after you had gone. You perhaps don't know that Boyd had a five-pound note by post this morning for

a birthday present? That was what caused him to offer the feed. He was silly ass enough to put the fiver in his blazer pocket; and when he came in to change, the note had disappeared.'

'And has it been found?' asked Somerset.

'No trace of it,' said Newman. 'Boyd declares he hung up the blazer in the dressing-room; but several say it was knocking about the ground during the latter part of the match. Tranter saw it on the back of a chair by the pavilion. Dennis noticed it on a bench just before Boyd completed his innings, and he says he must have picked it up from there.'

'Boyd's blazer is scarcely likely to be mistaken for anybody else's,' Somerset remarked.

'Just what I told him,' Newman agreed. 'It's a shade worse than his socks and waistcoats. It didn't please him. He's been simply beastly about the fiver.'

'No wonder,' said Somerset. 'I should grizzle myself into a decline if I had lost it.'

'But you wouldn't be nasty about it,' protested Newman. 'You wouldn't suspect one of your own house of pocket-picking.'

'Preposterous!' exclaimed Somerset.

'Exactly,' said Newman. 'Boyd says he doesn't remember seeing the note after putting it in his breast pocket just before he went off to the match, and he didn't discover the loss until after tea-time. Consequently he threw out the suggestion that the note might have gone either before or after the match. There's a pleasant insinuation! I challenged him to have us all searched.'

'And were you?' asked Somerset.

'Not much,' replied Newman. 'He climbed down,

and said we misunderstood him. But we all know his mulish stupidity. If he gets a notion into his head, a pick and shovel couldn't move it.'

'I'm glad I've been out of it,' said Somerset slowly.

'Don't flatter yourself, my boy,' Newman warned him. 'You're really no better off than any of us. If we had been searched, you'd have found me going through your pockets as soon as you showed yourself.'

'What a lucky escape!' ejaculated Somerset.

'What d'ye mean?' asked Newman.

'Nothing, just nothing,' was the answer. 'I was only thinking. I'm turning in.'

Long after Somerset went to bed he lay conjuring up afresh his happy meeting with Wilton. The strange chance that the two Boyds were brothers! And what if the Fourths had really been searched! What a sensation if he had turned a fiver out of his pocket! Boyd would have had him consigned to the county lock-up.

Although the next day was Sunday, Boyd's missing five-pound note occupied a great portion of the Fourths' thoughts and conversation. There was no avoiding it; for even if it was forgotten for a short space, there was Boyd's sour face to come along and give it a fresh start.

On Monday the day's work pushed the missing fiver into the background to a greater extent. Boyd received a telegram at midday, and forthwith was noticed in close converse with Sergeant Crooks, and it was surmised that the business was connected with the lost note. But Boyd confided in nobody, refusing to discuss the matter even with Pilditch.

'The matter is out of my hands, and my tongue is tied,' he said. 'Possibly something may happen, possibly not.'

The first to whom anything of note happened was Draycott. He was absent from school from immediately after breakfast until eight o'clock in the evening, a friend of his family, motoring in the neighbourhood, having unexpectedly called at Bramleigh and secured a day's leave for a spin across a neighbouring county.

Draycott had returned to school, and had been in his room about ten minutes, when the door quietly opened to admit the school sergeant.

'If you'd knocked the door, I shouldn't have been offended,' Draycott reminded his visitor. 'This room isn't the gym. nor yet the drill-yard.'

Sergeant Crooks evidently did not feel it incumbent to apologize. He simply sat down on the nearest chair and stared hard at the Fiver.

'You've been away from school all day, Mr. Draycott,' commenced the sergeant.

'Now you come to mention it, I believe I have,' acknowledged Draycott satirically. 'Perhaps you'd like to look at my tongue to see what I had for lunch? 'Pon my word, Crooks, you'd better scrap your present manners and buy a fresh ha'porth. What next?' he snorted.

'Before leaving the village you obtained some postal orders at the post office,' went on the sergeant in a cold, level voice. 'You tendered a five-pound note and received half a sovereign change.'

'Bull's-eye, sergeant,' admitted Draycott; 'but it's like your confounded impudence to make me a target for your nosy officiousness. Surely you've not come to tell me that the note's a wrong un, a stumer, a——'

'It was stolen,' put in Crooks stolidly. 'Or it was found and no attempt made to find the owner. In the

eyes of the law wrongful conversion is nearly as bad as theft.'

'That's quite nice of you to be so explanatory,' said Draycott. 'Gives one a sort of comfy feeling. There's nothing makes for friendship like these heart-to-heart confidences. Has there been much sun at Bramleigh to-day?' he asked suddenly and meaningly.

The sergeant exhibited tokens of rising choler, but made a great effort to maintain his judicial calm.

'It's no joking matter,' he said solemnly. 'I'm trying to do you a service. I'm asking you for an explanation to save you the necessity of making it to the police.'

'What do you wish to know?' asked Draycott, realizing with a jerk that he was on the fringe of some horrible misunderstanding.

'How did you become possessed of the note? It's a plain question that calls for an equally plain answer.'

'Quite so,' agreed Draycott. 'But hang it, I can't answer off-hand. I want to think. I must make inquiry. Look here, sergeant,' he appealed, 'if I run over to Burnett's I can put the matter right in a couple of minutes.'

'No use, sir,' Crooks informed him. 'Mr. Boyd couldn't discuss it with you. It has passed out of his hands.'

'Oh, blow Boyd!' exclaimed Draycott irritably. 'The matter's got nothing to do with him.'

'Everything to do with him,' the sergeant averred positively. 'It was his note that was stolen.'

'It's just a miserable coincidence,' protested the Fiver. 'Five-pound notes are more like than peas.'

'In this case they're the same pea,' said Crooks. 'The note came from Squire Jocelyn, of Brookhurst,

on Saturday. Mr. Boyd wrote to the gentleman last night, and he wired the number of the note to-day. Yours was that number. Now you've got to own up, or there'll be trouble—very serious trouble.'

Draycott was flabbergasted. He sat drumming on the table with his fingers, his eyes on the ceiling.

'As I said, I can settle it at Burnett's,' Draycott assured him. 'I'll go at once. It isn't Boyd I wish to see.'

'I must go with you,' said Crooks, rising to his feet.

'You seem to consider me under arrest,' complained Draycott. 'It's a rotten attitude you're taking, for which you'll be sorry later.'

'Remains to be seen,' responded Crooks. 'I'll apologize when it's necessary.'

Man and boy walked over to Burnett's. At the foot of the stairs Draycott halted.

'Surely there is no need for you to come up,' he protested. 'I couldn't very well escape you, especially in my slippers.' He held up a foot in proof of it.

The sergeant only nodded his head, but whether it was in assent or dissent there was no telling.

Draycott skimmed upstairs two steps at a time. He dived into Somerset's room, obviously pleased to find the Fourth alone.

'I say, Somerset,' he burst out, 'what about that fiver you lent me? Crooks, the doddering old policeman, says it was stolen, or some such beastly rot. Of course it's all right, but just tell me something about it so that I can go and wipe the floor with him.'

'So you received the note from Mr. Somerset,' broke in Crooks from the doorway having quietly followed in Draycott's wake.

'You're just a poking nuisance,' blurted out the

Fiver on irritation's topmost note, facing Crooks hotly. 'I'm sorry,' he said, turning back to Somerset. 'I wouldn't have said a word had I known he had crept up behind me.'

'You can't say we're not getting a bit warmer,' said Crooks with a satisfied air. 'I can apologize to you, Mr. Draycott, although I've only been doing my duty.'

'Oh, go to Jericho,' snapped Draycott. 'I don't want any apology. I rather want to punch your silly fat head.'

The sergeant ignored the amiably expressed desire.

'My business is now with Mr. Somerset,' he said; 'and it would be best, Mr. Draycott, if you left us to ourselves.'

'Leave you to bully and bounce Somerset?' asked Draycott a little incredulously. 'Not if I know it. I'm in this act until I learn more about it. If Somerset's got half the gumption I believe he possesses, he'll refuse to say a word until he and I have had a little quiet conversation.'

Somerset appeared to have no marked inclination one way or the other.

'I've no objection to leave you to discuss it between you,' put in Crooks. 'It makes no difference now I have traced Mr. Boyd's note two steps back to Mr. Somerset.' The sergeant thought that Somerset appeared to be startled at the mention of Boyd's name. 'I will give you five minutes,' he added as he walked to the door and closed it behind him.

'Isn't he the limit?' exclaimed Draycott, the moment they were alone. 'He fancies himself Scotland Yard and the Spanish Inquisition rolled into one. Now, old man, out with it. Where did the note come from? Just between ourselves.'

He made a cabalistic cross with his forefinger on his throat in token of inviolable secrecy.

'The note was my own to do as I liked with it,' said Somerset. 'I've nothing else to say to you or anybody.'

'But, my dear chap, you'll have to say something,' pleaded Draycott, amazed at his friend's unexpected attitude. 'They'll simply make you, or put an awful construction on your silence.'

'Let 'em,' said Somerset with terse doggedness. 'I suppose I can have a five-pound note as well as Boyd? He hasn't got a mortgage on all the fivers in the country. The fellow's a perfect nightmare to me.'

'Crooks says they can prove that the note Boyd received by post on Saturday morning and the one you gave me in the evening are one and the same,' Draycott informed him. 'They've got the number, and that clinches it. You don't seem to recognize the seriousness of the position.'

'I recognize all I want,' maintained Somerset. 'They're making some idiotic mistake, and must find out the blunder for themselves. I'm not going to help them.'

Draycott was fast losing patience. He was frantically anxious to see his friend out of the boggle, but was helpless so long as Somerset stupidly refused any jot of information. He looked as if he would like to shake him.

Crooks was tapping the door impatiently.

'You'll be in front of the Hedgehog before you're five minutes older unless you open your mouth,' said Draycott desperately, in the hope that he could make some impression on Somerset's mistaken determination.

The door opened to disclose the sergeant and Boyd.

'You've had quite long enough to discuss anything that matters,' said Crooks. 'Now perhaps Mr. Somerset will have something to say.'

'I can only say that the note I gave to Draycott was absolutely my own,' replied Somerset, with eyes looking fearlessly at the sergeant.

The sergeant's experience of boys was wide and varied. If ever eyes were wells of truth, Somerset's answered the description. But facts are stubborn things, and Crooks was a stubborn man, and—they were at a dead end.

'Why can't you believe me?' exclaimed Somerset, turning almost fiercely on Boyd. 'You must know I wouldn't do the rotten thing you are suspecting. You can't really believe it.'

'Why should I believe you?' asked Boyd coldly. 'What do I know about you? I'm only going on the plainest evidence. You're being given a chance to clear yourself, and can't do it.'

'What do you want me to do?' queried Somerset.

'I don't want you to do anything,' was the reply. 'It's a matter of indifference to me. I know what you ought to do. If you'll confess, I'll say nothing further about the fiver; but you must leave Bramleigh in the morning. The doctor would insist upon it, but you needn't wait for his decision. It would save pain all round.'

'And if I refuse?' persisted Somerset.

Boyd shrugged his shoulders and spread out his hands.

'You're asking for it yourself,' he reminded Somerset. 'I had no desire to be brutally frank, trusting you had enough sense to perceive the obvious. I don't see how it can help but be a matter for the police. It's a duty to the school as well as society.'

For just a moment it seemed as if Draycott would spring upon Boyd and hammer a little milk of human kindness into his unctuous carcase. But the situation was saved by Boyd turning upon his heel after a nod of understanding to Crooks.

The sergeant gazed fixedly at the culprit for a moment.

'You'd better come with me to see what Mr. Burnett has to say,' he said, motioning Somerset out of the room.

XVII

A MARE'S-NEST

'WILL you just pull yourself together and tell me exactly what is the matter?'

Barwell had pushed his visitor into a chair, and was standing over him. Draycott had come blundering into the captain's room with hot words on his lips—a jumble of which he could make nothing, except that Somerset was in trouble.

'Now tell me all about it from the beginning,' urged Barwell.

'There's no time,' replied Draycott. 'Somerset's on the carpet at Burnett's, and he may be at the police-station before you can say "knife."'

'From the beginning, please,' Barwell adjured him afresh.

Draycott flashed at the skipper a look of irritable protestation.

'It commenced in my room on Saturday night; I seem doomed to bring that kid to trouble,' he began.

'He called in to see me on his way up from the station.'

'He had just left me,' put in Barwell, 'and there were no signs of trouble then—very much the reverse in fact.'

'I was wishing I had got another £5 to liquidate some debts and chuck up gambling,' resumed the Fiver. 'I was knocked silly when Som fished a flimsy out of his pocket. I feel an awful sweep for borrowing off a junior; but he talks like an old man, and bound me on my honour never to gamble again. It was just my

chance to get free. I was tied as long as I was in debt, and—and——'

'Get on,' urged Barwell. 'You took the fiver. I quite understand so far. Why Somerset should be in trouble for doing a good action—more than I would do for you—seems to require a lot of explanation, if your woolly brain will allow you to be explicit.'

'I passed the fiver at the post office, and it turns out it was a note that Boyd had lost earlier in the day. Number corresponds, and all that. Boyd accuses Somerset of theft, and wants him to send himself down, threatens him with the police, and—and—— Oh! I shall be locked up myself for assaulting the bounder before I'm much older.'

'But Somerset had a fiver when he was at Berringham,' said Barwell. 'I saw it. I know——'

He was about to say he knew where it came from, when he recollected Somerset's remark in the train, 'Not a word. It's a secret.'

Barwell's bump of caution was very fully developed. He decided it was necessary to proceed warily. There was something he didn't understand, and which at that juncture it was unnecessary to explain to Draycott.

'I'll go over to Burnett's at once,' announced the skipper. 'There's some gruesome mistake. What explanation does Somerset offer?'

'Practically none,' replied Draycott. 'Simply says the note was his own, and won't utter another word; and with Boyd and Crooks for judge and jury, he's found guilty straight off the reel. Boyd was just beastly about it. I ought to have twisted his neck.'

Barwell did not reply; he was relacing his shoes.

'You stay here until I return,' he said to Draycott as he left the room.

Crossing the Quad to Burnett's, Barwell went straight to the study door, the lighted transom indicating that the room was occupied. He knocked. No voice replied, but Mr. Burnett himself opened the door. The master motioned the captain to enter.

Barwell surveyed the group in silence. Mr. Burnett was looking very concerned. The sergeant was wearing an air of magisterial importance. Boyd was endeavouring to appear as if the proceedings were utterly distasteful, but belied by a gleam of malicious satisfaction in his eyes that it was impossible for him to repress.

And in the centre of the room stood Somerset with brightly burning eyes set in a pallored face. His air was mainly one of defiance, mingled with exasperation, as though he inwardly girded at unkind fate that left him defenceless before the enemy.

'I don't know, Barwell, whether you know the details of this case, which is causing me acute distress,' said Mr. Burnett.

'Quite sufficient, sir, to declare the charge to be utterly absurd,' replied the captain.

'I'm relieved to hear you say so,' responded the master, while Boyd shot at the captain a glance that said plainly how little he was thanked for his interference. 'But Somerset's attitude is so very inexplicable,' complained Mr. Burnett, 'that it seemed as though he wishes to convince us of his guilt. I began to wonder whether he was attempting to shield another person.'

Barwell thought the master might very well be farther from the mark.

'That I cannot tell,' answered the captain. 'I may say I saw that particular note myself in Berringham on Saturday night before it passed into the possession of Somerset.'

To say that the statement created a sensation in the room is to express it mildly. But all eyes were upon Somerset, who appeared like one half demented.

'You mustn't, Barwell,' he pleaded. 'You'll do somebody a very great injury. If I can have until Wednesday morning, very likely I'll be able to offer an explanation.'

'May I have a word with Somerset, sir?' asked Barwell. 'Alone, I mean.'

'Certainly,' agreed Mr. Burnett, who was inclined to believe that, whatever the mystery, Somerset would come out blameless, or at least without any particular discredit. He signed to Boyd and Crooks to withdraw, and followed them himself.

'Now what is all this foolery about?' demanded Barwell, putting his hand under Somerset's chin and tilting his head upwards. 'Wilton gave you that five-pound note. I saw him, and asked for one for myself. You don't suppose for a moment that he stole it? At any rate, I fail to see how he could have stolen it from Boyd.'

'They say the number is the same,' Somerset reminded him.

'Yes, it's a bit of a facer,' said Barwell; 'but there's some explanation that at present is beyond us. You shut me up a few minutes ago, saying I should do somebody an injury. Did you mean Wilton?'

Somerset nodded his head emphatically.

'For the life of me I can't see how he can be injured,' exclaimed Barwell. 'In any case you can't be permitted to suffer for him. Man alive, he wouldn't allow it himself, if he knew about it.'

'Where the money came from is Wilton's business,' protested Somerset. 'I'm not going to open my mouth without his permission.'

'You propose writing to him?' suggested Barwell. 'That was what you meant by waiting until Wednesday?'

'Yes,' assented the boy. Already he was a new being, and passionately grateful for Barwell's presence and assistance.

'Very well, we'll leave it at that,' said Barwell. 'We'll wait until we can hear from Wilton. I dare say I can arrange it. Now you keep a stiff upper lip, and we'll soon get the tangle unravelled.'

Barwell opened the door, and Mr. Burnett, Boyd, and Crooks re-entered.

'Somerset wishes to write a letter,' said the captain to Mr. Burnett. 'I know to whom. The answer, in all probability, will clear up the mystery, certainly clear Somerset.'

'I sincerely hope it will prove to be the case,' replied the master. 'We'll suspend the investigation *sine die*.'

'Do you mean, sir, that we are to stand still and do nothing in the matter in the meantime?' asked Boyd.

'Exactly what it does mean,' replied Barwell hotly. 'You've got to suspend judgement. Above all, you've got to keep your mouth shut, which is probably far from what you have been doing. Sorry, sir,' he added turning apologetically to the master.

'I quite agree, Barwell,' answered Mr. Burnett.

'One more point, sir,' went on Barwell. 'Who instructed Crooks to haul up a scholar on practically a criminal charge, cross-examine him, intimidate him? Are we to be dragooned by the drill-sergeant?'

Sergeant Crooks was feeling distinctly uncomfortable.

'Mr. Boyd, he came to me, sir——' commenced the sergeant.

'And you should have referred him to Mr. Burnett,' interrupted the captain, appealing to the master.

'Although I had yet said nothing on the subject, I objected most strongly to the sergeant's attitude,' said Mr. Burnett, 'and intended referring it to the doctor at a later stage. At the moment my sole concern was for Somerset's position. I think that is all. Somerset will write his letter. I will at once explain sufficient of the matter to Newman, and he can make it known to all in the house.'

A minute later only the master and Barwell were in the study.

'I was exceedingly worried when you appeared on the scene, Barwell,' confessed Mr. Burnett. 'I feel we've already lightened the atmosphere very considerably.'

'I propose completing it to-night, sir, with your permission,' said the captain. 'While Somerset is writing his letter—I know it's to his brother—I'll ring him up, and get the matter settled out of hand.'

'Splendid!' exclaimed Mr. Burnett. 'There's a complete telephone directory on the top of my desk.'

'At this time of night we'll get a call through quickly,' said Barwell as he commenced searching for the Blankshires' number.

A couple of minutes later he had got the local exchange and gave in the call, and then they settled down to wait until ten minutes had elapsed.

Ting-a-ling-a-ling!

Barwell literally snatched at the receiver.

'Is that Aldershot 525? Get Lieutenant Somerset on the line, please.'

There was a pause of a full couple of minutes.

'Hallo! Is that Somerset? Barwell, Bramleigh, speaking. Listen carefully. Your brother Jack is

accused of stealing the identical five-pound note which I saw you give him on Saturday night. Yes, yes, we'll supply you with details later. Can you tell me how you came by the note?'

Barwell listened for nearly a minute, and then replied, 'That clears Jack completely. What time did you arrive in Berringham?'

Another pause.

'Many thanks. You've not the slightest need to worry. Oh, yes, Jack's all right. I'll see him through. Full details will reach you to-morrow. Good-night!'

Barwell hung up the receiver, and, turning to Mr. Burnett, said:

'Lieutenant Somerset arrived in Berringham at four o'clock on Saturday afternoon. He went straight to the Hen and Chickens Hotel, rang up his brother, and then had his tea. He left the hotel at 8.30—Jack and I were with him—and paid his bill at the office as he passed out. He tendered a ten-pound note, asking for a fiver in his change, as he wished to give it to his brother. I saw him hand it over. Of course, he doesn't know the number of the five-pound note, but can furnish us with the number of the tenner if necessary.'

'Remarkable!' exclaimed Mr. Burnett; 'and clears Somerset beyond the shadow of a doubt. Why not ring up the hotel and clinch it still further? Possibly the hotel people will know from whom they received the note.'

Barwell again took down the receiver. 'Berringham 159,' he said. 'Are you Hen and Chickens Hotel? Bramleigh College speaking. On Saturday night Lieutenant Somerset, of Aldershot—doubtless you'll remember him—paid to you a ten-pound note, and in

his change you gave him a five-pound note. Strangely enough, that very note had been stolen from the college some time earlier in the day. Can you tell me how you came by it, and at what time you received it ?'

Barwell listened attentively, jotting down a couple of notes.

'Many thanks. It helps us considerably. Will communicate with you again if the necessity arise.'

Barwell again swung round, more animatedly than ever.

'It's simply splendid,' he said. 'The hotel clerk remembers the five-pound note perfectly. She changed it for a horsey-looking individual exactly at half-past three. She is sure of the time because she had just made up the bank paying-in slip, and hesitated whether or not to include the note, but as a messenger was waiting to go to the bank decided not to make out a fresh slip. The note was certainly in Berringham while Lieutenant Somerset was still a half-hour's journey distant. Eureka! Boyd and Crooks will eat dirt for their mare's-nest.'

'I'm heartily glad to get at the bottom of it,' said Mr. Burnett. 'I'm sure I shouldn't have slept to-night for thinking of poor Somerset.'

'And what sort of night would he have had?' asked Barwell. 'I'll run upstairs and see him before I go, sir. My news will be a first-rate sleeping draught.'

'You might send Boyd down to me at the same time,' said the master. 'Good-night, Barwell. You have done a night's real good work.'

If Mr. Burnett was under the impression that the knowledge of Somerset's trouble was confined to the members of his own house, he was grievously mistaken. Before bedtime the news had flashed from house to

house that the boy, who was now probably the most popular in the school after Barwell, had fallen from his pedestal with a mighty crash. He was lying under a serious charge to which he could offer no defence. He was doomed to be sent down, and probably after an early train in the morning the school would know him no more.

But when Bramleigh awoke to a new day, word pulsed through the school that all was well with 'Other' Somerset. He had put his traducer to confusion ; he had been vindicated to the full ; he was reinstated on his pedestal.

More than that, the fiat had gone forth that Boyd should publicly apologize to the boy whom he had attempted to brand as a thief with such malicious haste.

It could not be said that Boyd apologized with a good grace. He repeated the words that expressed his regret for having caused Somerset pain, for having been too ready to believe evil of him ; but they were words, and only words. He was feeling the indignity of the position into which he had brought himself, and never a thought of the heart-breaking situation into which he had thrust Somerset. Personally Somerset did not care a brass button whether Boyd apologized or not. His great consolation lay in the joy of his friends at his happy release from the temporary slur upon his character.

Of course, some allowance was to be made for Boyd. He was the victim in one respect. He had lost £5, and not the remotest chance of getting it back from the quarter in which it evidently went. During the earlier part of the cricket-match various strangers were among the spectators, and doubtless one of these

individuals rifled the pockets of his blazer left lying carelessly about.

Boyd, however, was in high hope that Squire Jocelyn would replace the note of which he had been despoiled. As soon as he heard from Sergeant Crooks that the culprit was Somerset, he had scribbled a hasty note to the squire, informing him that the telegraphed number of the note had been instrumental in tracking the thief, who turned out to be 'a fellow named John Somerset,' who had not been long attached to Bramleigh.

Rather to Boyd's surprise his epistle elicited neither another five-pound note nor a reply of any kind. He did not know that the Rev. Aubrey Barwell had asked his son for a full account of the affair, and that Tom Barwell's statement and comments had been handed to the squire.

Boyd had lost more than a five-pound note, had he but known it.

XVIII

OUT OF BOUNDS WITH A VENGEANCE

JACK SOMERSET had closed his books and put out the study light. He looked out across the Quadrangle. The September moon was softening the beauty of the mellowed, weather-worn old college buildings. There were dark pools of shadow; the ivy was set out in strong relief against the grey stones the greenery adorned. The world was flooded with silver radiance in which the modern school houses stood out almost as clearly as if it were day.

Somerset did not hear quiet, quick steps behind him. A hand fell on his shoulder, and a voice said:

'A penny for your thoughts, and then I'll tell you something that is worth tuppence.'

'I should have the better bargain,' replied Somerset.

Barwell could not see Somerset's face, but his tone sounded a little lugubrious.

'What! got the mollygrubs on your birthday?' asked the captain.

'I think it's my birthday that has done it,' was the answer. 'I had a wonderful surprise this morning, nothing less than a five-pound note in a registered envelope. Just the note, and not a line with it. The address was typewritten and the postmark "Brookhurst."'

'I hope it'll not cause such excitement as the one you had in July,' remarked the captain, with a laugh. 'You are going it! A couple of fivers within three months. Some of you don't half tickle auriferous

music out of the oof-bird. That's not a bad word at this time of night.'

'I thought it was perhaps from your father,' said Somerset. 'Possibly it might be from the manager of the aviation works, but I don't think so, as he tipped me a sovereign at the commencement of the term.'

'It isn't my governor,' Barwell informed him. 'I've just had a letter from him by last post. He enclosed a p.o. for you for a humble quid, and told me to wish you many happy returns.'

'Well, I give it up,' replied Somerset. 'Some day perhaps I'll learn his name and thank him.'

'But a fiver doesn't breed mollygrubs, does it?' asked Barwell.

'Of course, Boyd's the trouble,' said Somerset. 'He nearly always is,' he added a little bitterly. 'He saw me open the envelope; and when he heard somebody say the postmark was "Brookhurst" he looked furious, and he's been on the jar all day.'

'Boyd's concerned with my two-pennorth of good news. He's leaving at the end of the term. His uncle is sending him to Hillechester. Now there's a tit-bit for you,' concluded the captain.

It certainly was not bad news. Boyd would have been going up to Henderson's at the end of the term, and his removal from under the same roof would surely entail a little additional peace for the object of his dislike. But for the ill-conditioned fellow to disappear altogether from Somerset's educational ken meant the removal of the one bar to the boy's complete happiness.

Somerset did not express his thoughts, but his sigh of relief was sufficient answer for Barwell.

The Berringham athletic sports tournament was billed for the morrow, and several Bramleighites had

entered for various events. Barwell was a strong candidate for the high and long jumps, Carrington and Myddleton were in for the hundred yards' sprint, and Somerset and Boyd would be rivals in the mile handicap.

'Feeling pretty fit for to-morrow?' inquired Barwell. 'Rotten handicapping, or you would never have to give Boyd fifty yards.'

'I think I shall just pip him,' replied Somerset. 'If I succeed, he'll have another grievance. My fear is the Berringham crack, although he has to concede me forty. Still, he'll have to move, for I did the mile last night in four minutes thirty-five seconds.'

The conversation wandered into various desultory college affairs, and presently Barwell went off to his own quarters.

The Bramleigh boys acquitted themselves well at Berringham sports. Barwell was first in the high jump and second in the long; Carrington was first and Myddleton third in the sprint. Somerset carried off first prize in the mile, Boyd being one of the 'also ran.'

Thanks to Barwell, they had obtained permission to remain in Berringham to attend a cinematograph show, at which the chief attraction were films depicting big-game hunting in Africa. Barwell and Carrington, however, went off somewhere else 'on their own,' and Myddleton and Boyd left the pictures soon after half-time.

Somerset returned to the station alone, about ten minutes before the 9.20 was due out. A train was standing at one of the platforms, and in a compartment close at hand was Boyd talking to a couple of youths.

Somerset had been about to inquire whether it was the train for Bramleigh; but seeing Boyd already

seated, he thought there was no necessity. He walked along the platform and entered an empty compartment. Not more than two minutes elapsed before the train started, much to the surprise of Somerset. He consulted his watch, which pointed to 0.13. He concluded it was wrong, while he congratulated himself upon arriving at the station a little before time, as he thought, or he certainly would have been left behind.

Two minutes later he was afflicted with doubts. The illuminated clock high up in a tower by the side of the line indicated 0.15. His watch was correct, and it seemed as if he were in the wrong train. He tried to persuade himself that it was an impossibility, and would be able to ease his mind at Midcastle, the next station. He glued his face to the window in order to sight it the quicker.

The train did not stop at the first station. Somerset could not recognize any familiar feature, and it certainly was not Midcastle.

The boy was hypnotized for a moment. He had made a horrible mistake. The train, judging by its speed, was an express. It might not be stopping until it had covered there was no telling how many miles. He would pull the communication-cord and bring the train to a standstill. But the notice, printed in red, intimating a heavy fine for improper use, caused him to abandon the idea.

Nothing remained to be done but to wait, with all the patience he could, until the train drew up sometime, somewhere!

There was some consolation in the knowledge that Boyd was only a few compartments away. Two of them in distress would be better able to convince Mr. Burnett that they had made a genuine mistake.

For just one desolating hour Somerset sat simply aching for the train to stop, and exactly at 10.15 it drew alongside the platform at Belaston, forty-eight miles from Bramleigh.

Somerset was out on the platform before the train was at a standstill, and to his immense surprise found that he had no companion in misfortune. Boyd certainly had not come to Belaston.

Somerset explained his dilemma to a platform inspector, who listened to the young passenger's trouble and advised him to the best of his ability.

'First of all,' said the man, 'there should be a matter of nearly four shillings to pay for excess fare, but I think I can wink at that. Now it ain't possible to get by rail to Bramleigh to-night, and that's settled. If so be as you go to High Level Station on the other side of the town—that's on the West Midland line, you know—you can catch the mail at 10.40, an' that'll drop you at Flickerby at 11.45. An' that, I guess, is about as near to Bramleigh College as you can get. Exactly how far off it is I can't say.'

'Five miles,' put in Somerset very soberly.

'Then I shouldn't try it,' said the inspector. 'If you've got the money, it would be better to put up for the night in Belaston, and go on to Bramleigh by an early train in the morning. If you haven't got enough brass, I'll lend you a bit, an' you'll get a very comfortable bed at the Temp'rance Hotel, third street on the left outside the station.'

Somerset expressed his gratitude to the good-natured fellow, assured him he had ample funds, insisted upon tipping him a shilling, and announced that he thought he would remain in Belaston for the night.

Outside the station the boy changed his mind. He

decided to go to Flickerby. He could walk or run the five miles in an hour. He would ring up Mr. Burnett from the High Level Station, and all would be as well as he could arrange it.

Upon reaching the High Level Station he found he could not obtain a trunk call nearer than the exchange, which was too far away, and he would have to forgo the telephone message, regretting that he had not thought of it earlier.

When Somerset actually commenced the return journey, he felt happier than had been the case since 9.15, when he found he was in the wrong train. Every passing second would carry him nearer to Bramleigh. He looked at his watch.

'10.45,' he murmured. 'I wonder what they are saying at Burnett's?'

At that exact moment the abode of the Fourths was not in its usual state of repose. 'Lights out' at ten o'clock was not a law of the Medes and Persians, since allowance had to be made for 'swotters,' under cover of which there were often excursions and alarms in the upper regions.

When Barwell and Carrington alighted at Bramleigh Station, they saw Boyd and Myddleton, and the captain asked the latter why Somerset was not on the train. The Fiver declared he had not seen him since the interval at the picture-show. Barwell assumed it would be the case with Boyd, and supposed Somerset had returned to school by an earlier train.

'We shall find him on the look out for us when we reach the Quad,' said the captain to Carrington. 'I've got his prize in my bag, and he'll want to take it to bed with him, as it is the first he's won in open competition.'

Somerset was not in view in the Quad or anywhere else in Bramleigh, and forthwith Mr. Burnett was ranting about the younger generation's casual regard for rules and other people's convenience.

Boyd was in a quiet simmer of enjoyment, but it would lose half its savour unless he could discuss Somerset's predicament with somebody. A confidant would double his joy, and he selected Pilditch as the favoured partner to share his knowledge.

'I've never known Somerset's equal for getting in the limelight,' said Pilditch. 'He's everlastingly in the school eye. Burnett is raving, and he'll give "Mr. A. N. Other" a pot very different to the one he won this afternoon at Berringham.'

Boyd subscribed to the opinion with a grin.

'We'll be at the top of the stairs when Somerset comes up from the 10.55 train,' resumed Pilditch, 'so as to hear Burnett walk into his young affections.'

'He'll not come by the 10.55,' Boyd assured him. 'Somerset is about fifty miles away. Now you know, but you're not to let on to Burnett. Leave him to find out. I've got a rag on Somerset this time. He's out of bounds with a vengeance.'

Boyd nursed a pyjama'd leg, and beamed on his satellite.

'Do tell,' exclaimed Pilditch, and Boyd related how a fortunate chance enabled him to lead Somerset astray.

'He can't reach school to-night,' murmured Pilditch. 'He'll come in the morning, and not as early as the milk.'

'Now what about being in the limelight?' asked Boyd. 'Quicklime is nearer the mark this time.'

'But Burnett ought to be told, or he'll be sitting

up all night,' suggested Pilditch. 'There'll be an awful row, and I wish you hadn't told me.'

'Pilly, you've got about as much pluck as a canary,' sneered Boyd.

'All very well for you to talk,' was the reply. 'You're leaving this term. I'm not, and I've been in hot water several times lately—thanks to you usually,' he added a little nastily.

'You'll be in hot water with me if you let it out,' his companion warned him. 'I'm just going to Dennis to borrow a book,' he added as he thrust his naked feet into slippers and went out of the room.

The moment he disappeared Pilditch darted off along the corridor to the top of the stairs. Down in the hall he could see Barwell, with one hand in his pocket and the other ruffling his hair, his attitude betokening mild exasperation.

'Barwell, Barwell, quick!' megaphoned Pilditch through his hands. He made frantic signs for the captain to join him, while he looked over his shoulder along the corridor.

'Somerset's at Belaston. Got into the wrong train by mistake. Boyd tricked him. You mustn't split on me. I thought you ought to know. Come up in ten minutes. Get it out of Boyd as if I hadn't told you. Boyd's out of our room now. He'll be back presently.'

This staccatoed information Pilditch jerked into the ears of the astonished captain, all the while on tenter-hooks lest Boyd should reappear and detect him.

'All right,' said Barwell. 'Leave it to me. You'll be safe so far as I'm concerned. If your bedroom door is closed, I'll take it that Boyd is inside.'

Pilditch shot back like a startled rabbit, gained the

room, and was in bed, as if composing himself for sleep, when Boyd returned a couple of minutes later.

Presently Boyd was getting into his own bed, when there was a knock at the door.

'Let 'em knock,' whispered Boyd.

'Better ask who it is,' suggested Pilditch.

The knock was repeated, insistently, impatiently, followed by a voice demanding admittance.

'Sounds like Barwell,' said Boyd wonderingly. 'Open the door and see what he wants.'

Pilditch obeyed, and shot back the catch. The door flung open, and the captain entered.

'Evening, Barwell,' said Pilditch, as though he had not seen Barwell for a week, and as if stricken with wonder at the lateness of the visit.

Barwell nodded in response to the greeting, and strode to the far bed.

'Boyd, you are responsible for Somerset's absence, and unless you tell me the exact circumstances I'll knock you through the bed.'

The captain's words permitted of no misunderstanding, and voice and looks were equally plain even to one of less discernment than Boyd, who at once perceived that, as usual, something promised to go wrong with his rag.

'If you will kindly explain——' commenced Boyd.

'You'll do the explaining,' interrupted Barwell stormily. 'Explain how you tricked Somerset into taking the wrong train. Out with it!' he ordered.

Boyd furiously recognized the inevitable, and forthwith did as the captain bade him.

Meeting two casual acquaintances who were going somewhere beyond Belaston, he sat in their compartment until the train was ready to start. He

acknowledged that Somerset saw him as he passed, and under pressure admitted that he knew the Fourth had boarded the train, and that he had quite sufficient time to warn him if he had cared to do so.

'And why didn't you?' asked Barwell.

'I'm not his keeper,' retorted Boyd. 'If he wants leading-strings, I'm under no compulsion to supply them.'

'No-o, I suppose not,' agreed the captain. 'Nobody could compel you to be other than first cousin to a disgruntled pig or an ill-conditioned bear.'

'You bestow your choice names on those who want 'em,' said Boyd, 'not that they affect me.'

The captain's patience frayed through.

'You bounder,' he exclaimed, 'I know the only appeal to you!'

He grasped Boyd, yanked him out of bed on to the floor, and cuffed him soundly. It was unfortunate for the victim that his leather belt was in reach of Barwell, who seized it, and laid stripes on the Fourth with the regularity of drum-beats.

'Let that soak into your wretched hide,' said the captain when he thought the trouncing was complete, dropping the belt and walking out of the room.

Boyd sat on the floor feeling himself all over, endeavouring to find a spot which that flagellating belt had not scorched through his thin night attire.

Barwell went down to Mr. Burnett's study and acquainted the master with the new phase of the matter. A rapid search in a railway-guide showed the hopelessness of expecting Somerset's return until the morrow.

'We will ring up the Belaston station-master,' said Mr. Burnett. 'If we can learn that Somerset is safe, we can go to bed in comfort.'

Fifteen minutes later the platform inspector was at the other end of the line assuring them that the young gentleman was putting up at the 'Temp'rance Hotel' for the night, and returning to Bramleigh by the first train in the morning.

XIX

'DEMOISELLE' TO THE RESCUE

THE train was a few minutes late when it drew into Flickerby. Somerset was the only passenger who alighted, and it was just five minutes short of midnight when he asked the only porter whether there was any means of getting to Bramleigh.

The porter was very different from the inspector at Belaston. He may have been tired or sleepy or merely surly; in any case, he did not propose to waste any time over a boy who ought to be at home and in bed.

'I only know one way at this time o' night,' replied the man. 'Shanks's pony.'

'Isn't it possible to obtain a vehicle of some kind?' queried Somerset wearily.

'There's a fly at the Pig and Pincushion, but the landlord's abed long ago,' the porter informed him. 'He's only got two hosses, an' they come in at eleven o'clock beat to the wide world. It's walk it or nothin', mister.'

The man commenced extinguishing the only two lights on the platform.

'Is there a telephone here?' asked Somerset a trifle more downheartedly.

'Yes, and the office is locked up,' was the answer. He did not think it incumbent to inform the boy that the key was in his pocket.

Somerset had cycled from Bramleigh to Flickerby and back only upon one occasion. He wondered

whether he would experience any difficulty in finding the way.

'I think the road lies straight ahead until I reach the top of Corbin Hill?' hazarded the boy as the porter extinguished the second light.

'Straight enough as makes no matter,' was the answer; 'but you must turn at the cross-roads two miles on, or you'll miss Corbin Hill and find yourself on the way to Berringham. Moon'll be up soon, an' then you'll be all right. If you get stuck, you'll have to ask the way.'

He did not suggest whom the boy was likely to meet on lonely country roads in the smallest hour of the morning.

Flickerby was of no importance except as a railway junction. It was little more than a village, and Somerset soon left it behind, passing the last road lamp and striking into the darkness of the countryside.

When he had first made up his mind to go to Flickerby, he had judged that he would accomplish the five miles within an hour, but he speedily revised that opinion. In the intense blackness he could not attain ordinary walking pace, unless he risked falling into the ditch that flanked the broken and uneven footpath.

Shortly he took to the middle of the road, and made better progress, until he came to a section that had been newly metalled and had yet received no attention from the steam-roller.

The boy's one fear was that he would blunder on past the cross-roads and fail to take the necessary turning. But more by luck than judgement he ascertained the spot where four roads met, only to find himself unable to decide which of a couple of roads would lead to Corbin Hill. After a time he located

a finger-post ; but having no matches, he was unable to discern the names of the places to which the wooden arms pointed the way.

He was about to climb up the post when he was startled almost out of his wits.

A motor-car with lights out had drawn up with a crunch of the brakes only a few feet away.

'This is the spot,' exclaimed a voice in a hoarse falsetto. 'Just strike a light, and see which finger points to Bramleigh.'

'Shut up, you idiot,' warned a second individual in a voice with a markedly foreign intonation. 'Do you want the county about our ears?'

Instinctively Somerset felt that there was something sinister about this stealthy approach and the evident necessity for silence. He shot back a few feet, and crouched down to minimize the risk of being discovered.

A minute later a man descended from the car. He struck a little bunch of matches and held the flare up above his head. In the momentary glow Somerset could see the man's florid features. He was fair-haired, and had a bristling, almost fierce, upturned moustache. It needed scarcely a second thought to decide that he was German.

'Are you sure you can still proceed in the dark?' inquired the man as he struck another match to light a cigarette.

'As long as I know I'm on the right road,' answered the falsetto voice. 'I've done it half a dozen times in daylight and twice by night.'

'Once we've looted Hedges' shed you might put on the lights as soon as we've cleared the village, and——'

The listener could not hear the concluding words, as the speaker got into the car,

Somerset was assured his instinct had not been wrong. These mysterious individuals were engaged in some plot against Lieutenant Hedges, and it was his plain duty to frustrate their nefarious purpose, if there was aught a boy could do against at least a couple of grown men; there might be more in the car, although only two had spoken.

Somerset's mind was working furiously. Ideas chased each other far more rapidly than the written word can set them forth. Bramleigh was now three miles distant; and if these miscreants proceeded ahead of him, they would be able to effect their purpose and get clear away without interference.

There shot into his mind the great idea of all; it was a desperate chance, but the only one available. At all risks he must try it. If he succeeded, it would be something towards attaining his end; if he failed——

But Somerset refused to consider failure in this first stage of his almost forlorn hope. Like a shadow he had stolen to the rear of the car, and just as it started he swung himself silently on to the back.

From his place of vantage he was able to satisfy himself that he would have to deal with four men—a quartette that would stick at nothing in the execution of a deep-laid scheme.

The boy's plan seemed eminently feasible, providing he could escape detection. When the car came to a stand he proposed to slash the tyres with his pocket-knife, so as to render a rapid flight impossible, and then speed into the village and give the alarm, when measures could be concerted to capture the strangers before they could get far away.

While the boy feverishly revolved his scheme in

search of any flaw, he made a desolating discovery. Theoretically his plan was perfect, but in practice it was an absolute impossibility, for the simple reason that he had no knife !

He remembered lending it to Carrington in the sports pavilion at Berringham in the afternoon, and the Sixer had not returned it.

Forthwith Somerset had to devise a fresh plan. He guessed that the car would not be driven through the village, but would take a by-road that would lead to within a few yards of the shed down on the beach. He now proposed leaving the car at a point nearest to the village, into which he would race for assistance, trusting to be able to reach the shed before the plotters had completed their operations.

The moment came when Somerset dropped from the back of the car. Although the moon had not shown herself, the boy was on sure ground, and within three minutes he was hammering the door of the village policeman, in whose window appeared a faint light that indicated the likelihood of prompt attention.

The door opened almost instantly, revealing, not Constable Perkins, but a much younger man, who happened to be Mrs. Perkins's policeman nephew on a holiday visit to Bramleigh. He was sitting up in order to have a cup of coffee ready for his uncle, who would be passing on his wide night beat in about a quarter of an hour.

It did not take the young policeman long to grasp the boy's breathless story. He snatched a lantern from off a shelf, took down a truncheon from the wall, and handed to Somerset a heavy walking-stick.

'We'll set off at once,' he said. 'We want to get on

the spot like greased lightning. I'll run upstairs and tell aunt to rouse some of the men neighbours and send them after us.'

A minute later he shot downstairs again, and the couple set off at a good swinging gait in the direction of the boat-shed.

When they got within fifty yards of the spot they slackened down into a stealthy glide, for they had no desire to run into the open arms of the enemy. Nearer and nearer they gained upon the shed, but could discern not the slightest sound to betoken the presence of the raiders.

'Not got here yet,' whispered the policeman. 'If there's a watchman, as you say, we'd best knock him up, and then with the three of us inside we'll put a stop to the little game.'

Perkins flashed his lamp upon the shed, and in an instant it dawned upon them that they were not too soon—but too late.

The door was wide open! The raid had been accomplished and the perpetrators vanished!

Man and boy sprang into the shed, Perkins flashing his lamp here and there, the beams finally resting upon poor old Meakin, bound and gagged and thrust into a corner underneath a tool-bench.

Somerset tackled the gag, while the policeman cut the cords that tied the man's arms to his body and also entwined his ankles.

Freed from the gag, Meakin was soon pouring out his story. Hearing Lieutenant Hedges' signal-whistle, as he thought, he had opened the door promptly to find himself in the grasp of four men in whose hands he was as helpless as a child. In an incredibly short time he was tied up by three of his assailants, while

the fourth was inspecting the model submarine in the light of a powerful electric pocket-lamp.

It said much for their perfectly laid plans that the robbers knew exactly where to look for the scale drawings, the plans, and elevations of everything connected with the invention that promised to revolutionize naval warfare.

Not longer than ten minutes had seen the commencement and the end of the daring outrage that would deprive the lieutenant of the fruits of a year's unbroken and patient labour : for flying was but the young inventor's recreation, and used more as a blind than anything else to distract undesirable attention from the greater matter in which he was engaged.

Whence the desperadoes had sprung, or whither they had fled, Meakin had no idea, but his aggravated auditors were better informed. They knew that the thieves had expressed their intention of making for Berringham, but there was the possibility that in the meantime they had changed their minds. They could hasten back into the village and communicate by telephone with the Berringham police, but between one and two in the morning there would possibly be difficulty in getting the exchange. Another motor-car could be obtained to set out in chase, but not in a sufficiently short time to allow of any hope of overtaking the fugitives.

Meakin informed them that the lieutenant had been summoned to London by telegraph early in the afternoon, probably a ruse that formed part of the plot to obtain the plans. The aviator would not have hesitated a moment to fly by night to defeat the villains.

It occurred to Jack Somerset that he would attempt

the feat himself, but that the hangar was too far away to give him a chance of success.

It was only at that moment that the old coastguardsman appeared to get into his mental stride.

'There's a flying-machine at the back of the shed,' he said. 'It's got a tarpaulin over it. A gentleman arrived in it about tea-time. He had come to see the lieutenant, but, finding him away from home, went off to spend the night with some friends. Before he went he filled the petrol-tanks, and got everything in order for setting out on the return journey about breakfast-time.'

'What kind of a machine is it?' asked Somerset with avidity. 'Quick, Meakin, and we may head the thieves off.'

'I think he called it a "devilsell," sir,' said the old man.

'"Demoiselle,"' suggested the boy.

'That's it, sir, I dare say,' agreed Meakin.

'Good!' almost shouted Somerset. 'It's a self-starting silent engine. I know how to handle it. Come on, the pair of you. Get a move on, time's precious. "Demoiselle" to the rescue!'

XX

FROM SEVENTH HEAVEN TO THE DEPTHS

IF Jack Somerset were indeed going to trust himself in the air, it was a stroke of luck for a 'Demoiselle' to be available, since he understood it better than any other, his father at one period having been greatly enamoured of that type of machine. At that time it was the only aeroplane that had flown at sixty miles an hour.

Small, and almost toy-like, the diminutive monoplane only measured thirty feet from the front to the tail, while from tip to tip the wings measured not more than sixteen feet.

Meakin, knowing that Somerset was a favourite of Lieutenant Hedges, with whom he sometimes enjoyed a flight, was not particularly perturbed at the thought of a mere boy launching himself into space; but the young constable viewed the experiment with considerable misgiving. It might be highly desirable to foil the thieves, and catch them if possible; but he did not think it justified the risking of a human life. He did not hesitate to voice his opinion, even while he assisted in making ready for a start.

'You don't know Lieutenant Hedges,' said Somerset. 'He's given me some ripping times, and I'm not going to see him "outed" by any foreign scoundrels, if I can prevent it.'

'It's madness to try flying in the dark,' protested the policeman. 'You won't be able to see where you are going, and you'll break your neck in landing.'

'If I set out in a straight line with Berringham, I shan't be able to miss it,' Somerset assured him. 'The signals along the railway will be an excellent guide. If the thieves light up, as they suggested, I'll be able to see them too, and act accordingly.'

'You can't land on the railway,' objected Perkins. 'You'll be barging into a church steeple or coming down on the roof of a house. I'd only be doing my duty if I stopped the tomfoolery.'

'The landing will be very easy,' the boy assured him. 'On the right hand of the main road, just as it enters the town, there are a couple of big corn-fields. They'll be as comfortable as dropping on a feather-bed.'

Pointing the machine in the requisite direction, Somerset clambered into the seat, a leather strap beneath the wings, and just below the two-cylinder twenty-five horse-power motor. He tried the levers, and gave the word for the start.

After only a short run along the straight road the machine lifted and shot away, just as half a dozen villagers came hurrying to the spot to assist a policeman in the execution of his duty.

All the officer could do was to inform them that the duty had suddenly removed to Berringham, and his deputy had just gone to attend to it.

Somerset found that the wind was gusty, and the machine was canting ominously; but he contrived to right it, and he had the satisfaction of knowing that the 'Demoiselle' promised to make very short work of the fifteen miles.

Just as the boy had expected, the coloured railway signals would prevent him going astray, and they also enabled him to gauge the route of the main road,

whereon shortly he could perceive the lights of a motor-car heading for Berringham.

Little did its occupants think that, even as they congratulated themselves on the ease with which they had carried out their coup, Nemesis had set out in hot pursuit, literally on the wings of the wind.

Berringham was already in sight, and its lights, lamps in the streets and illuminated clocks in towers, appeared to be rushing towards the young aviator, who guided the machine in the direction of the corn-fields. He pulled a lever, and the monoplane glided down.

As it touched the ground the skid under the bows struck some obstruction, the tail tipped up, and Somerset was fired out of his seat ; the skid ripped off, and the wheels crumpled up. It was not a good landing by any means, but the standing grain broke Somerset's fall ; and when he had recovered his scattered senses he raced for the end of the main road and the town.

What the robbers would do when they reached Berringham was a matter of conjecture. They might merely pass through it, in which case it would be necessary to give information to the police in order that a car might set out in pursuit. They might be making for the railway-station to catch a train to carry them farther away from the scene of their misdeed ; or, secure in the assurance that the robbery was yet unknown and pursuit a very remote possibility, they might elect to stay in the town and continue their flight at their leisure.

Somerset selected a corner near the railway-station as the spot best likely to serve his purpose. It commanded a view of the main road toward Bramleigh,

and also the three principal thoroughfares that led to other points of the compass.

Within three minutes the lights of the motor-car appeared, the vehicle moving at a good pace now that the dark country road was left behind. In the well-lighted space in front of the station the boy could easily pick out the man whom he had seen at the cross-roads between Flickerby and Bramleigh.

The eyes of all four occupants of the car appeared to rest on the boy. They might possibly have wondered why he should be abroad at 2.30 a.m.; but it certainly never entered their minds that his presence was connected with themselves, else had the car put on speed and raced through the town instead of pulling up at the Hen and Chickens Hotel. A big gate opened, and the car turned into the hotel yard, and was lost to the sight of Lieutenant Hedges' avenging representative.

Somerset heaved a sigh of relief when the gate closed, and a still bigger one when he saw two policemen appear at opposite corners, crossing to meet each other on a refuge in the middle of the street.

When the boy suddenly dashed up to them and poured out his story, the policemen were immensely interested, finally amazed, and rather inclined to view him as an impudent young hoaxer. If he had claimed to have walked from Bramleigh on his hands, or used the telegraph-lines as an aerial transporter, either would have seemed more probable than his declared dash through the darkness on the 'Demoiselle.'

But the straightforwardness of Somerset's story, his challenge to one of them to go and inspect the damaged aeroplane, his general anxiety, and his intention to remain on the spot to lay the charge

against the quartette in the hotel convinced the policemen of his sincerity and the necessity for prompt action.

Attached to the lamp-post in the centre of the refuge was a telephonic fire-alarm. One of the policemen broke the glass and called up the police-station, rapidly informing the inspector-in-charge of what had happened at Bramleigh, and asking for sufficient men to effect the capture of the four individuals concerned.

In a quarter of an hour the police had completed their arrangements, and an inspector and half a dozen men were inside the hotel at the door of the coffee-room, wherein the four raiders were refreshing themselves after their night's very successful labour.

They were astonished and disgusted beyond words to find the room in possession of the police and themselves under arrest. At first it looked as if they would show fight, two of them whipping out revolvers on the instant ; but when the inspector calmly informed them that the hotel was surrounded and every avenue of escape closed, they recognized the utter futility of opposition, and acknowledged themselves beaten. The plans and papers which had been stolen from the Bramleigh boat-house were handed over intact, and the prisoners were escorted to the police-station to await further proceedings.

With the accomplishment of the task to which his heroic young spirit had urged him, Somerset was on the borders of collapse. After leaving Berringham in the wrong train he endured nearly three hours of mental strain consequent on his absence from school, followed by an equal period of still greater stress of mind, accompanied by urgent physical exertion—and all upon top of a tiring day.

The inspector perceived his condition, and instantly sought to remedy matters.

'You've about had enough, I guess,' he said, pushing the boy into a chair and arranging a cushion behind his head and shoulders. 'A cup of hot beef extract or a drop of hot milk will buck you up immensely.'

The boy smiled gratefully. He was not quite sure which drink he would prefer. The room was going round, and he wished the inspector would stop it. He closed his eyes, and when the officer brought a steaming cup five minutes later he was fast asleep.

The policeman surveyed the boy approvingly for a moment, and then left the room, closing the door behind him.

And what of matters at Bramleigh?

Within ten minutes after the 'Demoiselle' had set out in chase of the robbers who had despoiled Lieutenant Hedges, the village was alive, and men and women, and even children, all hastily dressed, were scurrying off to the boat-shed.

Bramleigh had not witnessed such excitement since a rick-fire a couple of years ago.

The good folk listened open-mouthed to Meakin's story, in which he enlarged upon the rough usage and indignity to which he had been subjected. But shortly he found that his grievances were of little account; the popular mind had been seized by the youngest actor in the drama, as in imagination he was followed in his race against time through space.

In the midst of the hubbub the village constable appeared, by no means pleased to come in at the tag end of the affair. It was always his luck to be out of the way when anything occurred that might spell promotion. If there was any official credit

forthcoming, it would fall to his nephew, who could afford to wait for opportunities of distinction.

‘Haven’t thought of informing the college folks, I suppose?’ he asked, as if his gigantic intellect had alighted upon something that would not occur to smaller fry.

Perkins junior replying in the negative, the constable announced his intention of at once proceeding to the school, intimating that his nephew had better accompany him; and the couple went off to knock up Jimmy Niblett.

Niblett, in response to the clanging bell and battering on his front door, appeared at his bedroom window in no very amiable frame of mind. He had been kept up late by the absence from school of one of the Fourths, and surmised that the prodigal had now arrived, instead of waiting like a Christian until a decent hour of the day.

When the porter found that the disturbers of his peace were the village constable and his nephew, he jumped to the conclusion that Burnett’s lost lamb had got himself into serious trouble, which he was always prophesying would be the ultimate fate of a number of Bramleighites, if they only met with their deserts.

The Perkins couple only stayed to inform Niblett that the missing boy was somewhere up in the sky between Bramleigh and Berringham, and went on their way to give Dr. Hedges the shock of his long and varied scholastic career.

‘A most incredible thing,’ murmured the doctor. ‘Mr. Burnett assured me the boy was staying the night at Belaston, having taken a non-stop train there in error. And now you tell me that——’

The doctor paused in contemplation of the tragic possibilities of the affair. Somerset’s spirited action

might easily end in disaster—in death. At that moment the recovery of the plans came in a very bad second to regard for the boy's safety.

Ting-a-ling-a-ling !

The doctor took down the receiver, and the two policemen listened to his replies to the speaker at the other end of the line.

'Bramleigh College, Dr. Hedges speaking.'

There was silence for nearly a couple of minutes, the doctor's face indexing interest, surprise, and whole-souled pleasure in turn before he spoke again into the instrument.

'As you say, it is simply amazing. Of course I'm delighted and exceedingly proud of him. Quite so. The lieutenant will arrive in Berringham by the first train from London. Yes, yes, he'll instruct you about the "Demoiselle." He'll not care if it's smashed to splinters. By all means let him sleep. Yes, good idea. Shall be pleased to see you.'

The doctor turned to the two policemen, who had already gathered that all was well.

'Somerset reached Berringham safely, although he came a bit of a cropper at the finish. The thieves are under lock and key, and the boy is fast asleep after his trying adventure. Inspector Mansell is bringing him back to school by car at eight o'clock.'

'It sounds like a bit out of a book, sir,' replied Constable Perkins, taking up his hat, and motioning to his nephew to do likewise. 'We'll wish you good-morning, sir.'

'Good-morning !' The doctor reached for a box of cigars. 'Here, help yourselves to a handful. You might come up at eight o'clock to meet the inspector, and cook will give you some breakfast.'

The two policemen went their way down to Niblett's, where over one of the doctor's choice cigars Jummy listened with eyes like saucers to the amazing tale.

'It's marvellous!' he exclaimed. 'Between you and me I've been thinking that there boy a blessed nuisance, and all the while he's a blessed—thingumme-bob—you know what I mean.'

At a few minutes before eight the Bramleigh boys were in the Quad, all save Boyd, who was up in his room, where he could survey the scene below without courting undesirable attention.

The lodge gates opened, and in swept a car, Inspector Mansell at the wheel and Jack Somerset by his side. As the brakes were applied in front of the doctor's door the whole school let out a yell, and salvos of cheers shattered the air. Boys shook hands with each other, waltzed in couples. Kerr danced the tango on the edge of the central fountain until he fell in, and was dragged out with his ardour undamped, although it was the only dry thing about him.

Somerset was overwhelmed at the warmth of the reception. He essayed to get down from the car, but while on the step he was seized by his delirious schoolmates. It seemed as though a forest of hands was on him to the imminent detriment of buttons. He was lifted shoulder high and carried round the Quad in yelling procession, and finally dumped down on the doctor's steps, a little breathless, much dishevelled, but gloriously happy.

Dr. Hedges seized the boy's hand and drew him into the quiet haven of the breakfast-room.

'Three cheers for the doctor!' yelled a voice, and the response was immediate and terrific, and each house gave calls for their masters in turn.

'Three cheers for Boyd!'

Dead silence.

'Three cheers for Boyd,' insisted Tranter. 'It's all his fault, you asses.'

And the school entered into the joke, raced across to Burnett's, and cheered Boyd to the echo, to the wondering surprise of the recipient of the dubious honour, who learnt what it meant when a candid Fourth joined him.

'You've come a glorious mucker again,' said Pilditch, with a grin. 'You ragged Somerset out of bounds—I don't think! Why, he's in the seventh heaven—and all thanks to you!'

Pilditch apparently was right, for it seemed quite impossible for Somerset ever to attain a higher pinnacle of popularity. His feat was not only the talk of the school, but the Press made the most of it. The boy was haunted by reporters and photographers. His portrait appeared in the illustrated papers, but it was the line drawings of imaginative artists in some of the commoner 'rags' that afforded capital cuttings for Somerset's scrap-book.

Place of honour was accorded to one weird production in which he was depicted driving a machine that appeared to be a winged furniture pantechicon, the young aviator garbed in a frock coat and silk hat, while he carried a knife between his teeth and a whole armoury of pistols projected from his pockets.

Naturally Somerset was in high favour with Lieutenant Hedges, who presented him with a watch, suitably inscribed, to mark his appreciation of the service which the boy had rendered him.

As Pilditch had remarked, Somerset was indeed in the seventh heaven.

But his elation lasted little more than a fortnight. One day he received a letter from his brother that cast him down into the deepest depths of grief. He hid the closely written sheet at the bottom of his box like a thing accursed.

XXI

TWO STRIPES

BARWELL sat with knitted brows, looking across the table at Somerset, who was the picture of woe.

‘And you’ll give me no particulars?’ he asked in a tone of mingled irritation and sorrow.

‘I’ve told you all I can,’ Somerset replied miserably. ‘Wilton is mad at the injustice of it all. He swears he is innocent, and there has been a gross miscarriage of justice. Naturally I believe him, though all the world declared him guilty.’

‘Of course he’s innocent,’ agreed Barwell, stretching out a hand and laying it on the boy’s arm. ‘He must fight the charge to the last ditch. We’ll appeal to the general. We’ll have questions asked in Parliament. We’ll——’

‘He’ll do no more,’ asserted Jack. ‘He’s sent in his papers, and says the Blankshire mess can go hang.’

‘That’s just what he said in his letter to the gov’nor,’ said Barwell. ‘But it’s sheer madness. There is such a thing as justice, you know.’

‘And injustice,’ replied the boy doggedly. ‘Only yesterday I read of a man being set free after suffering three years’ penal servitude. The real criminal had just confessed, and so the victim is granted the King’s gracious pardon. But even the King can’t set the clock back three years. No “gracious” pardon can restore to the poor wretch the self-respect that has been crushed out of him, or atone for the physical

toil and the mental degradation he has suffered while cooped up with the vilest of the vile.'

Barwell made no attempt to interrupt. He could see Somerset was wound up, and nothing remained but to allow him to run himself down.

'Well that's what lies before Wilton,' resumed Somerset. 'He's not in jail, but he's cast out of the work he loved; he's a mock and scorn of the regiment, however much the colonel may try to hush it up. He's a leper, an outcast—and—and I've got to share the disgrace with him,' he ended brokenly.

'Rubbish!' blurted out the captain. 'You're no more to blame for Wilton's sins than I am. You can't be held responsible for him in any case.' Barwell noted the boy's quick frown, and hastened to explain. 'I mean even supposing your brother had done anything wrong.'

'You can call it "rubbish,"' said Somerset, 'but I know what I'm talking about. Do you suppose Boyd will miss the opportunity of rubbing it into me? He's been called home to see his mother, who is ill, or I should have had a taste of his quality by this time. He has tried rag after rag on me, and always failed; but there's no escape for me this time.'

Barwell was unable to controvert this opinion. Boyd would jump at the chance to humiliate Somerset, and neither threats nor persuasion would have any effect in restraining him. Personally he thought it would be a good thing for it to come—and come quickly—and then steps could be taken to prevent the matter being served up *ad nauseam* to keep Somerset in a constant state of miserable palpitation.

The captain did not think it advisable to express exactly what was in his mind.

'If you let Boyd break you up, you are not the chap I believed,' said Barwell. 'He is bound to gibe, but you'll live it down.'

'I wouldn't try for half a pin,' answered Somerset. 'I'm wondering whether it wouldn't be better for me to hop it. Many a chap at my age has to turn out into the world and shift for himself.'

'It's a pity your father is on the other side of the world,' commenced Barwell after awhile; but the boy broke in quickly.

'He's not to know. Wilton will not tell him, and he binds me to keep silence.'

'I believe you're both touched,' said the captain, expressively tapping his forehead with a forefinger. 'It'll be impossible to keep Mr. Somerset in the dark for long, as Wilton can't have his letters addressed to the Blankshires, Aldershot.'

'He's arranged for that,' Jack informed him. 'He is asking father to address him c/o Kings, the bankers and agents, and then he can have the letters forwarded.'

'Well, I think Wilton is a quixotic numskull,' observed Barwell. 'You had a sharp lesson about secrecy in the Draycott case, and perhaps now you're in for more of it.'

The boy pondered the matter.

'I can't help it. It's Wilton's business, and I'm not going to interfere with his arrangements. You don't believe in secrets, and of course couldn't keep one, or I might—might——'

'Don't be an ass,' the captain urged him. 'You well know that I should never do anything to interfere with Wilton's plans unless it were to do him good.'

‘Very well, I’ll tell you part,’ said Somerset; ‘but you’ll not be able to interfere, even if you wished. Wilton—is—in—the—army!’

Barwell, with his elbows resting on the table and his head between his hands, stared searchingly at his informant before he answered:

‘That means that he has joined as a gentleman ranker—serving under an assumed name. It will be a rotten life; he’ll never stick it.’

‘He knows more about the ranks than we could tell him,’ protested Jack, ‘and he’ll stick anything in working out his salvation in his own way.’

Barwell nodded. He failed to see how service as an ordinary ‘Tommy’ would do anything towards solving Wilton Somerset’s problem. But Jack’s next words enlightened him.

‘Wilton says that he has been wrongfully deprived of the commission for which he was educated, and which was bought for him. He intends to gain another by working for it, and see if he meets with better fortune. He loves the army, and they can’t keep him out of it.’

‘Absolutely quixotic, I repeat it,’ murmured Barwell, ‘but I withdraw the word “numskull.” He’s a dear, misguided enthusiast, and I wish him luck.’

‘That’s ever so much better,’ said Jack, with something more like a smile. ‘I feel all the better for admitting you into the secret.’

‘But having commenced, you’ll have to continue,’ Barwell warned him. ‘If ever you get good news, I’m to share it. I shall expect you to post me up from time to time.’

‘It’s a bargain,’ said the boy. ‘I’ll be off to Burnett’s now.’

An hour later Somerset had an unpleasant surprise, for from his window he saw Boyd coming across the Quad on his way up from the station. For some reason or other he had taken it into his head not to announce even the day of his return.

Somerset rightly assumed that the hour of his tribulation was at hand. Of one thing he was determined: if Boyd wished to be offensive he would have to do it in the privacy of Somerset's own room, for he had no intention of leaving it to lay himself open to a public encounter.

Half an hour passed, and then there was a knock at the door.

'Come in!' cried Somerset in an assumed easy tone which he was far from feeling.

The door opened, and Boyd appeared, his cheeks a little flushed, his eyes agloat.

'I thought perhaps you would be sporting the oak in--the circumstances,' he commenced. 'I've a bone to pick with you, Somerset--pick it jolly clean too. You know what I mean.'

Somerset was silent for a moment, and Boyd stood regarding him with malicious amusement before he resumed:

'I daresay you've had the latest bulletins from Aldershot, and I hope you like 'em. That fiver you had from your brother really belonged to the Blankshire mess, it seems.'

'It's a lie!' exclaimed Somerset hotly, springing from his seat and menacing Boyd with his fists.

The visitor retreated behind a chair.

'If that's your game,' he said, 'there'll be some others here in half a minute. If you want an audience, I've no objection.'

The adroit shot took effect, and Somerset fell back moodily into his chair.

'It's no use trying to burk facts,' went on Boyd. 'Your brother did the mess down for £50, either on that very day or the day before, so it seems to me you shared in the proceeds. Of course, my lost fiver only came in incidentally. That is,' he added, 'if the hotel girl clerk was telling the truth. I don't for a moment suppose she was; it would be easy for a gay young sub to persuade her to say anything.'

In his anxiety to hurt, Boyd paid no heed to the fact that he was making two contradictory accusations.

Somerset sat perfectly still, breathing heavily, debating with himself the latter part of the charge. Slowly the meaning burnt into his understanding, and once more he got upon his feet. His movement was ominously calm, but there was smouldering resentment in his eyes, and his fingers twitched.

'You mean,' he said measuredly, 'that I took your five-pound note down from Bramleigh to Berringham.'

'Great minds think alike,' scoffed Boyd, with a cynical smile.

In the next instant the smile changed to one of absolute fear, for Somerset, quite beside himself, sprung upon him and seized him by the throat. The goaded boy appeared to be imbued with the strength of half a dozen. He barged Boyd irresistibly backwards through the open door, across the passage to the top of the stairs, down which he flung him neck and crop.

The moment Boyd started on his helpless, downward career Somerset regretted his violence. He would not better matters by causing injury to his opponent, and was quite relieved that Barwell and Carrington, who were coming upstairs at the moment, contrived to keep

their own feet, while they saved Boyd from completing his ignominious journey to the bottom.

'Why these violent gymnastics?' inquired Carrington as he steadied Boyd on the middle step beside him. He knew quite well what had happened, but did not propose to view it other than jocularly. He looked at Somerset above him. 'Barwell and I were coming up to see you; but if you mistake your visitors for bags of coal and use the stairs as a chute, we'll go elsewhere.'

Barwell took up the running, and addressed Boyd.

'I didn't know you had returned. We'll go up to Somerset's room. Come along, Boyd; we shall require you.'

When the quartette reached the room and the door was closed, the captain turned to Somerset.

'What's the rumpus?'

'Gibes and lying accusations,' replied Somerset. 'I stood as much as I could, and then threw him out.'

'N—o!' drawled Carrington. 'It wasn't a "throw," it was a "shot." I know, for I nearly dislocated my shoulder in stopping it.'

'Don't act the clown,' Boyd advised him irritably. 'The pair of you are butting into business that doesn't concern you, and in any case I'm fed up with Barwell's interference.'

'I'm interfering on this auspicious occasion,' retorted Carrington, 'and as your amiability is so very overpowering I'll get to work at once. You appear to be making Somerset a scapegoat for the sins of his brother, always supposing he committed any. Is that correct?'

'This is a free country, and there's no law against discussing facts,' said Boyd.

'Spoken like a sage,' agreed Carrington. 'Then you'll not object to Somerset discussing facts concerning your own brother. If he doesn't know them, I'm prepared to post him up; for I have a cousin in the Blanks who writes me a gossiping letter occasionally.'

'What are you driving at?' asked Boyd, a shade of anxiety in his tone.

'Lieutenant Somerset was declared guilty of an offence, but a fair number of the mess believe him to be innocent. Lieutenant Boyd a fortnight ago was accused of cheating by means of marked cards. It didn't come to a court martial, but a committee by three votes to two decided to give him the benefit of the doubt. *Au contraire*, some of the mess believe he was guilty, and refuse to play cards with him again.'

Carrington looked around him from one to the other before he resumed:

'Now it seems to my limited intelligence to be a putrid idea that a chap must suffer for the sins of his brothers; in the case of fathers we have biblical authority for it. Look at it how you will, you two fellows appear to be much in the same boat. It's rough on both of you, and should draw you together rather than set you at loggerheads. 'Nuff said.'

'Carrington has put the matter very fairly,' said Barwell. 'So far as I am aware neither affair is known to anybody in Bramleigh outside this room. Have you mentioned it to anybody, Boyd?'

'No.'

The denial was practically the truth. On his way up he had met Pilditch, and had informed him that he was about to smite Somerset on the solar plexus, and particulars would be afforded later.

'That simplifies matters,' replied the captain.

'We'll keep the school in ignorance. It will make for the comfort of both of you—your own especially,' he added, looking at Boyd, 'for while most Brams would be sorry for Somerset, very few would sympathize with you.'

It was a home truth for which Boyd did not thank the captain, but he was too mortified to attempt to traverse the opinion.

A few minutes later the captain and vice had returned to Berry's, well satisfied with the use to which they had put the letter Carrington had received by the last post. They had been bent on heartening Somerset by informing him of the belief of some of the Blankshire mess in his brother, whereas they had contrived to kill two birds with one stone.

Somerset felt ten years younger. Carrington's intervention had restored to him a large measure of peace of mind, which he had considered was utterly lost to him.

Boyd had retired to his room to reflect bitterly on the unexpected spin of fortune's wheel, which had robbed him of the opportunity of crying quits with the detested Somerset.

The days rolled on; weeks passed into months. Jack Somerset, although with a vein of seriousness unexpected in his years, found many joys in life remaining to him. Time had laid its healing finger on what his imagination had construed into a maiming injury from which there was no recovery. True, the scar remained; but even that grew fainter by the application of certain epistolary emollients bearing the Dichfield postmark that came to Somerset twice a week with unfailing regularity.

One of these letters arrived with singular opportune-ness, and crowned a day that was a landmark in Jack

Somerset's career at Bramleigh. The boy read the written lines with suffusing eyes.

'Fine!' he murmured. 'He's got his stripe, and I've got mine—lance-jack of the Cottons and captain of the Fifth. I wish Barwell were here to tell him the news. I'll write to Oxford to-night, and inform him that dear old Quixote has knocked one sail off the windmill.'

XXII

A GENTLEMAN RANKER

THE barracks at Dichfield, a collection of red brick, barn-like buildings, presented few attractive features in the afternoon sun of a November afternoon.

Within one of the great barrack-rooms there was warmth and genial company. It contained two rows of iron cots, each at the present doubled up in two. On each cot was a mattress folded in three, and blankets and sheets folded and placed on top, the whole strapped together, and bearing a tin ticket showing the occupant's name and number. Round the walls of the room were two shelves, rows of iron pegs, rifle-holds, each man having the right to the portion of shelving and the pegs above or behind his cot.

In the middle of the room for use in the daytime were wooden tables and benches on iron supports, and here were men of the 19th Cottonshire Regiment pipeclaying belts, polishing buttons and metal facings, mending clothes, knitting socks, writing letters, playing cards, dominoes, or draughts; and three 'Tommies' were seeking to improve their musical education by assiduous use of a concertina, mouth-organ, and tin whistle, each playing a different tune.

Privates 'Nobby' Clarke and 'Shiner' Green were sitting on a wide window-ledge, endeavouring to annihilate each other at draughts.

'I huffs you,' said Shiner.

Nobby said nothing, but his looks plainly indicated

what he thought of himself, and he made the next few moves with his brows almost tied in a knot in the endeavour to atone for the loss.

'I huifs you again,' announced Green, looking up at his special friend, as if wondering at his state of mental aberration.

'Let's chuck it,' suggested Clarke. 'I can't help watching the new 'cruits.' He nodded his head in the direction of the drill-square, which their window overlooked.

On the drill-ground, which was swept by a wind that cut like a knife, stood an awkward squad of the most recent additions to the Cottonshires. Red noses, watery eyes, and chattering teeth were no aids to the recruits' comfort; but they were quite sure they would rather face the coldest wind that ever blew than the hard-bitted, vitriolic sergeant who stood in front of them for their sins.

Drill-sergeant Packer was a connoisseur in fluent vituperation, and spat out personalities without repeating himself with the precision and force of a maxim-gun. At the moment when Nobby and Shiner looked down upon the scene he was confining attention to one of his unfortunate victims.

'Hark to me, No. 3, front file,' he was saying. 'I take the King's good money to teach you how to walk an' where to put your feet. I want you to forget you've been splaying your plates of meat at the back of a plough ever since you left school, if you ever went to one.'

'Tien!' he bawled in a voice that made the recruits jump into corkscrew formation, and proceeded to instruct them afresh in the mysteries of the right turn.

In the next evolution No. 3 again failed to come up

to expectations, and the sergeant beckoned him with an impelling forefinger.

‘Where do you belong to?’

‘B Company, sir.’

‘Where is your home, I mean?’ snapped Packer.

‘In the 19th Cottonshire Regiment.’

‘Then the old 19th is a home for lost dogs,’ averred the sergeant with mock solemnity. ‘Where’s your birthplace?’

‘Here, sir,’ replied the recruit, pointing to a small birthmark on his neck.

Even the longsuffering squad was wreathed in broad grins.

‘Hang it all, man, where were your enlistment papers signed?’ asked Packer, his face apoplectic in hue.

‘At the bottom, sir.’

For a moment the sergeant’s eloquence failed him; but he bent on the recruit a look of withering contempt as he motioned him back to the line.

A minute later the squad was on the move in a series of turning movements that put the units in a glow in spite of the biting wind.

At the window above them it was No. 9 who had attracted Private Clarke’s particular attention.

‘Look at No. 9, Shiner. He’s hankin’. Every now an’ then he forgets he’s a ’cruit an’ does his drill a treat. Look at the shoulders on him.’

‘Nice chap too,’ said Green. ‘Last night I spoke to him. He was with Mike Maloney in the “dry” canteen. Will Somers is his name. And what d’ye think, Nobby? He stood Mike an’ me a couple o’ coffees, an’ paid for ’em with a quid.’

‘Do you think he stole it?’ inquired Private Clarke.

'No, I don't, Nobby; but what beats me is why a bloke jines the army if he's got ninepence to his name.'

Clarke was silent for a moment.

'Look here, Shiner, I'm on for the "dry" canteen to-night. I'll be interduced to Rooky Somers; it's nearly end of the month, and——'

'You'll keep off the grass, Nobby; I'm touchin' him meself for arf a dollar, an' I'm 'lowin' no poachin', I'll watch it.'

Private William Somers took to soldiering like a duck to water. He seemed to fall into none of the mistakes common to new hands, such as saluting the wrong person, &c.; nor did any of the practical jokes of the barrack-room bring ridicule upon him, for the simple reason that he appeared to 'tumble' to them by instinct. Most of his spare time he spent in the library and the recreation workshops.

Private Somers ceased to be viewed as a 'rooky' in a remarkably short time, and was a candidate for the 'dog's elbow' or lance-corporal's stripe almost before other recruits were well out of the awkward squad.

Although he was pleasant to all, and certainly made no enemies, he formed practically no real friendships save in the case of Mike Maloney, an Irishman, who had risen to non-com., only to lose his stripes through drink and toe his old original line.

Except for his one failing Maloney was as capable a soldier as the Cottonshires could boast, and thus should have been able to put the recruit up to all kinds of wrinkles taught by experience.

Strangely enough, in this apparently ill-assorted friendship it appeared to be the older man who deferred to the younger even in military matters; and certainly Somers exerted a wonderful influence in keeping the

wild Irishman 'on the bung,' the barrack-room slang for teetotalism.

Occasionally Maloney would threaten to fall from grace, but rarely was he even muddled before Somers would appear to yank him out of the canteen, get him to quarters, and read the Riot Act over him.

One visit Somers paid to a public-house in the town in search of Maloney had a most unexpected culmination that raised him high in the estimation of the Cottonshires.

When Private Maloney entered the tap-room of the Duke of Wellington, he found a mixed assortment of horse, artillery, and foot holding high revel in celebration of pay-day. The Irishman was popular, and no sooner appeared than 'treats' were offered him in various quarters. In a trice no less than three glasses were in front of him. He was just disposing of the first when in came Private Somers, and Maloney pushed away the other two glasses as though they did not belong to him.

'Hallo, Mike,' exclaimed Somers, with an eye on the empty glass, 'just ready to go, I see. We agreed to see the Temperance Society "gaff" to-night. We shall just be in time.'

Maloney quite meekly nodded his acquiescence, when Private Jackson, of the 101st, protested that the drink, which he had bought for his pal Mike, had not so much as been tasted.

'You've just had one, Maloney,' said Somers. 'I'd give any more a miss if I were you.'

'Wharreryer mean advisin' 'im to give my treat a miss?' asked the 101st hotly.

'It'll be no treat if he gets in the guard-room for it,' responded Somers quietly.

'Think ter git Mike on the temp'rance ticket, perhaps?' suggested the roist sneeringly.

'Private Somers answered smoothly:

'He might do worse, and so might others if they'd give the matter a thought. There's really no need to turn teetotaller if men would only act as decently as a pig, which always knows when it has had enough, and leaves off.'

'Callin' me a pig, are you?' demanded Jackson. 'That settles it, an' it's "docks up," me boy.'

'Apologize an' square 'im,' whispered Shiner Green in Somers's ear. 'He's the best bruiser of the "Dirty Shirts." Months ago they challenged us to put a man up against 'im, an' we can't find one who'd stand up to 'im for a couple of rounds.'

'Dirty Shirts' is the nickname of the roist, in memory of the regiment fighting in its shirt sleeves at Delhi in 1857.

'Are you puttin' 'em up?' inquired the aggressive Jackson, squaring off at Somers, who neither replied nor put up his fists. If he were hauled up for fighting, as would probably be the case, he intended to be able to say that he acted only after the utmost provocation.

'Won't drink, won't fight, won't do nothin', only act the "yapper,"' said the 'Dirty Shirt' aggrievedly, 'so here goes for a start.'

He shot out a fist at Somers, who promptly side-stepped and dropped his left fully between 'Dirty Shirt's' rather evil-looking eyes.

The company was electrified, and instinctively flattened themselves round the walls in order to leave the combatants as much floor space as possible.

Sheer amazement paralysed the Pride of the roist for a moment, and then he sailed in to rectify matters.

He landed a blow on Somers's shoulder and rather a staggerer on his ribs, for which in return he got a crack on an eyebrow that nearly removed it, and another on the mouth that loosened a couple of teeth.

Jackson was the most astonished man in Dichfield. He was deciding that he had been too precipitate. Unless he could get in a blow on the point this unknown Cotton would make an exhibition of him.

They got through six stubborn rounds, by which time the roist representative would scarcely have been recognized by his nearest relatives; whereas Somers only showed a slight abrasion on a cheek-bone, a puffed-up ear, and a slightly cracked lip. Of body blows, however, he had received a dozen or more, some of which he would feel for a week.

Maloney and Green, who were seconding Somers, at the end of the sixth round urged their man to act more on the offensive. He took their advice, and in the next two minutes fairly fought the roist to a standstill, finally upper-cutting him off his feet, a terrific blow from the effects of which he lay at full length while he was counted out.

Jackson presently scrambled to his feet, acknowledged himself beaten, and shook hands with the victor with great impressment.

'Outed by a teetotaller is what I can't unnerstand,' he growled to his cot-mate, who led him from the scene of his discomfiture.

Somers did not appear to be particularly proud of his achievement. As a matter of fact, he could have polished off his opponent in much less time but for the fear of getting his face marked. A chalk against him for fighting might delay his stripe. He congratulated himself on having escaped that danger, for with a

little care his few trifling facial blemishes would pass muster even with an inquisitive colour-sergeant.

Naturally Somers's victory was the talk of the Cottonshires, who desired his permission to issue a challenge to any regiment at that time stationed in Dichfield; but he scouted the notion, and no persuasions could induce him to change his mind. He appeared to be satisfied with earning the approval of his mates, and apparently had a horror of courting the publicity which a general challenge would entail.

He was more obdurate than ever after a conversation with one of the 'Old Seven-and-Sixpennies,' as the 76th Regiment is commonly called, whom he met in the park.

'I saw you put it across the "Dirty Shirt,"' he said pleasantly. 'Good set-to it was and all. Never saw nothing like it only once, an' that was at Aldershot in the officers' gym. of the Blanks. They're off to India soon.'

The 76th might have noticed a startled look flash into Somers's eyes if a passing soldier had not distracted his attention at the moment.

'My name's Pratt,' went on the man. 'Got a cousin in the Blanks. I was down to see him one day, an' that was when I spotted the boxer I'm telling you of. Lieutenant Somerset his name was. My cousin was balmy about him; reg'lar worshipped him, he did. He was about your build too, only you've got a moustache an' he hadn't.'

Private Somers merely nodded his head.

'Then suthin' happened what nearly broke my cousin,' resumed the 76th. 'His pet forged a cheque on the "Old Man" for £50, an' was found out. It seemed he was mug enough to pay just that money into his own bank account the very next day. Well, that

was arskin' for it, an', of course, a court-martial did the rest. Well, so long, matey.'

Somers remained on the seat for quite a long time—until the bell rang for clearing the park in fact.

Several times during the next fortnight Somers and Pratt encountered each other, and the 'Seven-and-Sixpenny' rather regretted that the Cottonshire man showed no disposition to be 'pally,' but rather the reverse.

But one day Pratt insisted on forgathering with the new lance-corporal.

'Remember what I was tellin' you 'bout my cousin in the Blanks?' commenced the 76th. 'Had a letter from him yesterday, all about that there lieutenant. They've found out suthin'. It was his own money what he paid into the bank. A brother what's at school let the cat out. He'd won it writing for a newspaper. An ole "sky pilot" down in the country has been stirrin' up the matter, an' now the "Old Man"—Colonel Warden, he is—would swop all his subalterns for Somerset, only they can't find him. He took the hump for bein' suspected, an' they think he's gone an' 'listed in some foreign army or suthin'. Anyhows, only the school kid knows where his brother is, an' he says he's taken his dying certain never to tell. It's a funny world, ain't it?'

'Not so bad,' replied Lance-Corporal Somers, slapping his leg with his cane.

He wished Pratt good-afternoon with a warmth and geniality that assured the roist that the Lance-Jack Cotton intended to be a pal after all.

In due course Somers was down for his second stripe, which would bring with it a considerable ease in duty, for a lance-corporal's billet is not 'all lavender,'

ever on the run for those above him, while the average private sniffs at the little authority with which the 'skater' or chevron of the lance-corporal invests its owner.

The ordinary 'Tommy' is not over-keen on promotion which brings work and worry in its wake, whereas Private Somers welcomed work ; work meant less time for thought, and there were thoughts which the young soldier desired to keep at bay.

Although there was not an atom of conceit in Somers's composition, he could not make himself at home in the barrack-room ; for although the majority of his mates were clean, smart young soldiers, as only might be expected, there were a few black sheep, drunken and foul-mouthed, who spoiled the moral atmosphere for one possessed of any sensitiveness.

By working hard for six years at least Somers knew it was within the bounds of possibility to get a commission ; but he could rise to sergeant long before that time, and get a bunk or small room of his own, and enjoy the greater refinements of the sergeants' mess.

There was foreign service too, in which occur more frequent opportunities for promotion.

'I hope we'll be on the rota for South Africa, or West Indies, or—or anywhere but India,' murmured Somers to himself.

XXIII

THE BAD EGG

THE sergeant pressed down a three-cornered tear in one sleeve and resentfully brushed some mud off the other. He ran his fingers through his hair, and set his cap at the correct jaunty angle. He tugged at his belt. For the trimmest non-com. in the 19th Cottonshires, Sergeant Pedley was astonishingly dishevelled, and looked as though he would give his fingers for just two minutes in front of a mirror.

Lieutenant Scott, the adjutant, looked up from company orders.

'Private Maloney broke out again, sir,' commenced the sergeant. 'Kicked up a rumpus in the bar of the Soldier's Rest, smashed a pound's worth of glasses, bashed a Centipede till he couldn't crawl, dropped a corporal over a fire-guard and singed his tunic, broke a policeman's chin-strap—chin suffered as well, sir—tripped up half a dozen civvies, and offered to fight two Linseed Lancers for a month's pay.'

'Sure you have omitted nothing, sergeant?' inquired the lieutenant wearily. 'Has he been brought in?'

'He's in the guard-room, sir, singing "Rule Britannia" to the tune of "The Minstrel Boy."'

The young officer drummed his fingers on the desk for a moment.

'The new captain joined this morning. He isn't by way of being a martinet, but with Maloney's record in front of him this afternoon's diversion will certainly

mean court-martial; a stiff dose of hard labour, followed by dismissal from the service, is not at all improbable. If Maloney will be such an utter ass, even his best friends can't help him.'

Pedley clicked his tongue in agreement.

'Orderly-room at eleven o'clock in the morning,' said Lieutenant Scott. 'It's sooner than the regulations provide, but I dare say he'll be sober enough.'

'He'll only be sullen by that time, sir,' replied Pedley. 'Maloney dries up like a gravel path in the sun.'

At 10.45 in the morning Captain Kilmaine was perusing the delinquent's record.

'Sergeant reduced to corporal for drunkenness and fighting; corporal reduced for riotous conduct and obstructing the police,' he mused.

'Yet at the bottom Mike Maloney is a downright lovable chap——' commenced Scott.

'Mich—ael Mal—oney,' interrupted the captain slowly, pinching his lower lip between thumb and forefinger reflectively.

'The best wrestler in the regiment,' continued Scott. 'Dog-fancier, a lover of everything in fur and feather——'

'Has he got a scar across the bridge of his nose?' suddenly asked the captain.

'That's the fellow,' exclaimed Scott. 'Do you know him?'

Captain Kilmaine walked across the room and closed the door. He faced round.

'Scott, tell me anything you can in Maloney's favour.'

'I don't mind admitting that I'm sorry for the poor beggar,' replied the lieutenant. 'His downfall dates

from the time he lost a bull-terrier—poisoned. He had trained the dog until it could talk as near as makes no matter. Maloney's suspicions fell upon an ill-conditioned brother sergeant, whom he promptly tied up into a handful of knots and put into hospital for a fortnight. Reduction followed in due course.'

The captain nodded his head, but did not interrupt.

'As a corporal for the second time Maloney behaved well until a bugler chivvied him about the dog. The corporal lost his temper and his stripe; his opponent parted with several teeth and his claim to being the best bugler in the band. This second reduction quite knocked the heart out of Maloney, and he has gone from bad to worse. Mind, sir, he isn't a soaker. He is practically a teetotaller between his fits of intemperance.'

From outside sounded the steady tread of the prisoner's escort.

'Scott,' said the captain, 'send the prisoner in to me alone. It is quite informal, I know, but I simply hate to introduce myself to the rank and file as though I were a common or garden stipendiary.'

Private Maloney came into the room, mechanically saluting a uniform, for he avoided looking at the face that crowned it. He was a well-set-up specimen of manhood, and apparently quite sober.

'Look at me, Mike Maloney,' ordered the captain crisply, yet in a tone that sounded nothing like a military command.

The culprit parted with his sullenness in a flash, and with startled wonder raised his eyes.

'The young squoire!' blurted out the private in a wail of abasement. 'Sorra a bit did Oi ivver expect——'

'I never expected to find a Ballycrea man disgracing his uniform and the estate on which he was reared,' interjected the captain. 'What would your poor old father say? Only three days ago he showed me a letter in which you said——'

'Arrah, squoire—Oi beg pardon, capt'in Oi mane—lave the ould man out av ut. Ut's me own racket intoirely. He shall not break the heart av him as long as Oi can put pen to paper. Ut's in a good cause, and whin Oi'm off stoppidges Oi'll be sendin' him a postal order.'

'Do you remember Father O'Dowd's warning about lying?' queried Captain Kilmaine quietly.

'Shure, Oi'll niver forgit, sor. Ut was the day whin ye kem home from school. The fifth of November ut was, an' ye lit off a box av fireworks in the railway-carriage an' sit fire to the cushions. Ut was a grate day, and ould Murphy—him what kep' the station, sor—was as mad as Dooley's red bull. Oi mane the wan wid the broken horn, what he bruk when he bunted Pat O'Grady out av his cart. Ut was you, sor, ye remimber, what lit the bull out av the field——'

Captain Kilmaine had not proposed being side-tracked by a torrent of loquacity.

'Private Maloney!'

'Beg pardon, sor—capt'in, Oi mane,' exclaimed the soldier contritely, squaring his shoulders with a jerk.

'Now listen to me,' said the officer firmly. 'I've read your record.' The private winced. 'You have had a good many falls, but——'

'Always bin having av thim, sor,' interrupted Maloney. 'But niver as bad as whin Oi tumbled off the ould castle ruin whin we was robbin' the owl's

nest. Och, shure, if Oi hadn't tumbled, ye certainly would ; an' ut was a toidy cut Oi got across the bridge av me nose. Oh, squoire—capt'in, Oi mane—ut was the foine toimes we had, an' now—now Oi'm like a rabbit in a gin. Rabbits, capt'in ! ' exclaimed Maloney with kindling eyes. ' Do ye moind, sor, whin me father was taching ye to shoot ? Ye kilt his best white ferret. Blowed off the front av him intoirely.'

' Never mind rabbits or owls,' said the captain brusquely. ' I'm thinking of——'

' Boiled owls, sor,' suggested Maloney, stifling a smile. ' Oi'm the bad spalpeen intoirely, but Oi'll turn over a new leat ; Oi'll sign the pledge an' shtick to ut.'

' Look at me Maloney.' The private brought his heels together with a click. ' I intend to give you one more chance. One more chance,' repeated the officer firmly. ' If I hadn't happened to have transferred to the 19th you would have been drummed out. You will certainly be court-martialled, but I'll get you off with cells. Be a man, Maloney.'

' Oi'll tek me gruel, sor, thank ye koindly. An' if annybody says Oi won't mend me ways, Oi'll knock off the neck av him loike a bottle av blackin'. Beg pardon, sor, ut's the shock av ut what fills me with joy loike.'

Captain Kilmaine threw open the door and signed to Lieutenant Scott and the guard to enter.

The lieutenant contrived to disguise his wonder, but Sergeant Pedley was plainly astonished out of his normal stolidity. He would not have been surprised if the gaunt rebel had jammed the captain in the top of the roll-top desk and shut the lid down on him. Yet here was Maloney wearing a beatific smile that would have done credit to a cherub on a valentine.

'I have interrogated the prisoner,' announced Captain Kilmaine. 'He will be court-martialled in the ordinary course. Take him away,' he commanded in a voice that instantly obliterated Maloney's smile. For a moment his faith was shaken, until he recollected the officer's dual personality—and of the two he infinitely preferred the 'squire.'

With a perfectly uncommunicative face the scape-grace fell in, and his feet joined a little shakily in the steady, disciplined tramp to the guard-room.

'You've done it this time, Private Maloney,' frigidly said the corporal who received him in durance vile. 'You found Captain Kilmaine a change for the worse, I'll back my stripe.'

'He's a howly terror, corp'ral, an' no error,' agreed the prisoner solemnly. 'He's first cousin to the Lord Chief Justice. "Private Maloney," he says, "Oi can howld out no hope for ye. Ye'll go to court-martial," he says, "an' ye'll be hanged by the neck——"'

'Wharreryer bleatin' about?' demanded the corporal. 'Do you think ye're at the Old Bailey? You'll end there, me boy, though!'

'Oi want to see the chaplain,' said the Irishman. 'Oi want him at wanst, quick an' sharp.'

'I want no chaffer 'bout the chaplain,' the corporal warned him severely. 'You can see him when you haven't any of "the steamer" left in you.'

For just one breathless moment the non-com. was in grievous peril of being invalided, but Maloney pulled himself up in time.

'Oi'm as sober as a lamb in a snowdrift,' the prisoner averred. 'Oi want to take the pledge.'

'Ordinary toke is all you'll take till worse comes

along,' was the reply. 'Take the pledge!' he sniffed as he slammed the door and shot the bolts with quite unnecessary vehemence.

At the court-martial the prisoner exhibited an air of marked humility, which went a long way towards securing for him the comparatively lenient sentence of fourteen days' cells.

When Maloney made his reappearance, his subdued demeanour caused it to be freely surmised that he was regretting having signed the 'temp'rance ticket.'

Thanks to the solicitations of Lance-Corporal Somers, he fought shy of the canteen for quite a long time; and when Maloney did venture at last within its doors, he limited himself to an astonishing number of small lemons and dry gingers to drown a thirst that was quite the envy of certain bibulous conspirators who desired to break down Maloney's good resolution.

Captain Kilmaine was delighted beyond measure at Mike's reformation, and he made a point of thanking Somers for the good influence he exerted over the Irishman; but those whose knowledge of Maloney was limited to his company record only marvelled—and waited.

They were not kept long in suspense—only until the eve of the 19th Cottonshires' sailing for India.

In an inn in a little back street in Southampton a thoughtless trick proved Maloney's undoing. A practical joker surreptitiously exchanged Mike's glass of ginger-ale for one of spirits, and before the Irishman discovered the substitution he had taken a long pull at his old enemy.

The spell of restraint was broken, and so, a couple of hours later, was the arm of a potman who attempted the forcible removal of the black sheep of the 19th.

At that moment there arrived on the scene the newly striped Corporal Somers, to whom the practical joker gleetully related the success of his trick. If he looked for applause he was vastly mistaken, for in a gust of righteous indignation Somers punched his head soundly and kicked him into the street.

Somers and a few companions at once took steps to smuggle the Irishman off to barracks without the intervention of the police. They contrived to avoid the civil authorities only to run up against a picket, who promptly seized upon the delinquent.

Maloney fought like a maniac possessed, and by the time he had completed his operations only a remnant of the picket was fit for further duty that evening.

Mike was frog-marched to the guard-room, and dumped down in front of a scornful corporal.

'Another drunken chalk up against you,' he remarked. 'It'll take pumice-stone to rub it out, and don't you forget.' All might yet have been well but for a further unfortunate remark. 'Don't glare at me like a hugly bulldog.'

The word had barely passed his lips before the non-com. recognized his inadvertent offence, and in the same instant realized that retribution was to be his immediate portion. The pandemonium in the guard-room during the next few moments was something to be remembered. When a dozen ungentle hands hauled Maloney off the foe, the corporal had a pair of lovely black eyes in the rapid making, together with a dozen minor casualties, none the less painful because they were less obtrusive to the view.

'Put the darbies on him, and shove him in the cells,' snorted an apoplectic sergeant-major who had hurried to the scene. 'Private Maloney won't forget

his voyage to Kalapoosh in a hurry. He's got a saloon ticket what he'll be willing to swop for the stoke-hole.'

The *Malabar* sailed next morning. Long before the Bay was crossed a good proportion of her passengers were afraid they were going to die, followed by a period of still greater fear that no such luck was in store for them.

Nobody, however, was in such a bad case as Private Maloney. To the horrors of *mal-de-mer* was added the rigour of troopship 'clink,' and the desolating knowledge that Captain Kilmaine had washed his hands of the Ballycrea reprobate who had broken his word.

In the long fits of depression that afflicted Maloney it would have been no cause for wonder if he had elected to drop overboard as the shortest way out of his trouble. But Corporal Somers was at hand to encourage and hearten him, ever reminding him that he had wiped out stains before ; and if he would only play the man, it was an operation that could be repeated.

XXIV

THE CHITMAR FORT

THE fierce fire of insurrection broke into a blaze not far from where the Kashgar river bursts from the everlasting snows of the Hindu Kush. Maunder, the Political Agent at Chitmar, had blindly refused to recognize the growing discontent of the Chitmarese, accounting them but the pariahs of the hill tribes, and not to be compared to the genuine Pathan, who knuckles under to subjection less rapidly than an eagle reconciles itself to a cage.

It could not be said that Maunder had not the courage of his convictions, for he stubbornly refused to send his wife and child to Gilgit, lest it should be construed into an admission that he feared trouble with the smooth-voiced natives whose destinies he was supposed to rule.

There was not a sorrier or more surprised man in all Hindustan than John Maunder when the bolt fell.

One morning the inmates of the Residency awoke to the sound of rifle-shots and the spattering of bullets on the log walls. The long low-thatched house was set in the midst of flower-beds flanked by deodars and thickets of flowering shrubs, and backed by the fort, a square stone-walled compound.

The Chitmar garrison had been weakened by the dispatch of a punitive force a hundred miles to the north-west. The total strength consisted of but threescore Sikhs under Major Poole, several subalterns,

a surgeon, and a telegraphist, although a reinforcement was already overdue.

The Residency native servants had deserted their quarters during the night ; and very speedily Maunder, his wife, their four-year-old little daughter, and a couple of orderlies were safely inside the fort. The telegraphist just had time to flash the news to Gilgit when the wire was cut, and the Empire-pioneers knew that all they could do was to sit tight until help arrived.

Three days later the expected reinforcement fought its way through the rebels. Colonel Whitcombe, Captain Kilmaine, a handful of subalterns, a dozen 19th Cottonshires, and a couple of score of Sikhs accounted themselves fortunate in getting under shelter with the loss of only ten Sikhs and three times as many men badly wounded.

Colonel Whitcombe was the typical Empire-builder, cool, alert, resourceful. The fort was admirably situated for defence in a bend of the rapid swirling river, whose black waters washed three sides of the position, leaving the fourth wall to face the little plain that gradually merged into the foothills and the unknown solitudes of the Hindu Kush.

The Chitmarese country really lay beyond the river ; but they held the rudely constructed bridge half a mile up-stream, and in but a few nights they had invested the fort with a line of sangars. The rebels knew only too well the value of time, and each morning showed sangars yet nearer to the helpless garrison, fivescore desperate men who answered the murderous fire of the dusky hordes that thirsted for their blood.

Colonel Whitcombe at the end of five days did not hesitate to say that he could hold out for a month. Two nights later he received a shock. The Chitmarese,

with an energy of which they had been deemed incapable, mined the wall from their nearest sangar. There was a terrific explosion, and with fierce yells the dusky warriors poured through the breach into the compound.

In the dim light of the topaz-yellow dawn the defenders fought for their lives in a restricted space that was speedily a shambles. As fast as desperate fingers could press the triggers death was poured out by the Sikhs and their stiffening of white men; and eventually the Chitmarese, broken and decimated, retired to their first line of sangars.

Even while the bloodstained, smoke-begrimed garrison congratulated each other that they were alive they were struck with consternation. Little Dollie Maunder was missing. In the pandemonium that had reigned during the attack the child had been kidnapped. A treacherous native servant who was no longer in the fort was supposed to be the miscreant who, with devilish cunning, had dealt this blow at the Agent.

A couple of hours later came a messenger from the Senaputti offering to restore the child if the garrison would surrender the fort and forthwith set out for Gilgit.

Dollie Maunder, a yellow-haired little fairy, was the idol of the fort. There was not a man who would not cheerfully have laid down his life for the child or her mother. But the fort could not be yielded for a score of infant lives. Once the little force relinquished the stone defences, notwithstanding the Senaputti's words, every man would be wiped out before they had traversed half a dozen leagues of the pitilessly sterile border solitudes.

The child must perforce be sacrificed for the flag.

Mother Empire in her own good time would avenge her death, but to neither the Agent nor his half-demented wife did the knowledge bring a shred of comfort.

The Senaputti intimated that he would wait twenty-four hours for the colonel's decision; and, failing compliance with his demand, the hostage would be put to death before the wall.

The white men shivered at the ultimatum, the while they ground their teeth in impotent rage at their helplessness. They dared not think in what guise the grim shadow would come to the little innocent mite upon whom the Pathans would vent their pent-up hatred with the devilish ingenuity of which only the Oriental mind is capable.

Captain Kilmaine was an old friend of John Maunder's; he was little Dollie's godfather. Brave man that he was, he visibly wilted in the face of the horror that had come upon them.

Colonel Whitcombe and his officers held a consultation, and then promised the awaiting messenger to send a reply at daybreak on the morrow. It was at the best only pitiful procrastination—a hope that some miracle might happen to avert the hideous calamity.

'Is there nothing we can do, Poolé?' asked Kilmaine brokenly as the council ended. 'I would give my life if I could place Dollie in her mother's arms.'

The major only shook his head miserably.

So did Private Maloney, who swallowed a big lump in his throat as he watched the captain turn a corner of one of the loop-holed buildings.

Mike Maloney was restless and preoccupied during the rest of the day, especially after he had listened to the telegraphist expounding a rough plan of the Chitmarese village to half a dozen Cottonshires.

'You think that is where they have carried the child?' queried one of the audience.

'Dead certainty,' was the reply. 'The Pathans would not keep her in the sangars, lest we rushed them and snatched the child back. It would be death to any sortie party that attempted it, though,' he concluded.

Mike Maloney withdrew into himself more than ever. He was thinking—thinking——

'Odds against,' he muttered. 'Ut's a chanst for the bad egg, and if ut come off the capt'in would forgive. There's Somers too. He'll be game to take a hand.'

The Irishman's eyes, set in pallored skin, gleamed strangely while he further communed with himself in a strange jumble of prayers for enlightenment and **maledictions on the enemy.**

Maloney sought out Somers as soon as the latter came off guard. They conversed long and anxiously, and after a time appeared to come to a decision. They separated, and proceeded about their duties as usual; but the observant might have noted that each had a preoccupied air, and there was a far-away look in their serious and strained eyes.

Night fell. The gong at the quarter-guard struck out nine just as a commotion arose among the Cotton-shires.

Somers and Maloney had disappeared!

Nobody recollected having seen them since dusk. They certainly were not within the fort. It seemed as though they had been snatched up into mid-air or else the compound had suddenly opened to swallow them up; or, what was more probable, they had unwisely exposed themselves upon the wall. Pathan bullets had found their billets, and poor Somers and Maloney had crashed to the ground outside the fort.

In all probability daylight would prove the truth of this last surmise.

Both, indeed, were outside the fort, not mangled corpses, but straining every nerve in the most desperate of forlorn hopes. Under cover of the darkness they secured a rope to a coping-stone of the rear wall, and down this they slid to the edge of the river, which during daylight they had surveyed to excellent purpose.

Powerful swimmers that they were, they found that crossing the stream was a terrible fight for life, and it was quite a quarter of a mile below the fort that they dragged themselves wearily ashore.

After a short rest the couple clambered up the steep bank, and then cautiously set out for the head quarters of the Senaputti. From his youth upwards Maloney had assisted his father in the Ballycrea preserves, and no hardened poacher could cope with him in woodland guile; and fortunately for the two Cottonshires this bank of the Kashgar river was sufficiently wooded to afford them just the cover that they needed.

Forcing a way through the green tangle was a veritable purgatory. Thorns scratched and whipped their hands and faces with diabolical persistency as they stole towards the point where they hoped to find little Dollie Maunder.

Without the rustling of a branch or the snapping of a twig Somers and Maloney at length reached the Chitmarese village.

From behind a leafy screen they surveyed the houses and a number of small tents in the fitful light of a few fires and torches scattered here and there.

While they sought to soothe their lacerated cheeks

with their bleeding hands, the couple wondered in which house or tent lay the object of their search.

Almost upon the instant a child's cry answered them. They never doubted that it was Dollie Maunder. Only a couple of nights ago they had heard the child scream in exactly similar fashion upon awaking and finding herself alone.

Before the flap of a little tent that stood apart flared two great torches, and between them squatted a Chitmarese guard with a rifle across his knees.

Somers and Maloney reviewed the situation in tense whispers. The critical moment had arrived, and one false step might seal, not only their own fate, but also that of the child for whose safety they were willing to sacrifice their lives.

The child was now quietly sobbing, and the two Cottonshires gnashed their teeth when they heard a native voice endeavouring to soothe her. They had hoped only to engage the soldier on guard ; but though two or half a dozen natives complicated the matter, it daunted the couple not a jot.

The two adventurers rapidly decided their course of action. Maloney dropped upon his stomach and commenced to wriggle along a circuitous path that would bring him to the rear of the tent, which was close to a clump of shrubs over which trailed a bougainvillaea with gorgeous purple blossoms. The Irishman's work lay inside the tent.

Similarly Somers stole off to tackle the guard, whom it was necessary to silence before he could vent an outcry or discharge his rifle.

Little Dollie again commenced to scream. The flap of the tent was raised and a second Chitmarese spoke

to the soldier on guard, who raised himself to his feet and passed outside the radius of the torches' light.

Nothing could have suited better the still figure that crouched in the shadow with eyes burning upon the guard, who was sharply outlined against the light of the torch in his rear. What happened must have seemed like black magic to the Chitmarese soldier. In a flash a shadow solidified into bone and muscle, a hand was on his mouth and another on his black throat. He was borne to the ground—a couple of ominous thuds, and silence.

Maloney heard the thuds, and with a gulp of exultation grasped their meaning. With his bayonet he slit down the back of the tent and sprang inside. There was only one native within, bending over the child. The Pathan opened his mouth to voice an alarm, but no sound issued other than a gurgle as the Irishman's bayonet did its fell work.

'Whist, darlin'!' whispered Maloney, snatching up the child in his arms. The wide-eyed little fairy was instinctively hushed as she snuggled against the khaki tunic. Private Maloney at the moment was little better than a terrible apparition to behold, but his voice was British, and wonder clamped the little tongue.

But Corporal Somers was at the flap of the tent with a warning that he could hear approaching footsteps, and the couple—Maloney carrying the child—darted for cover. Just ere they gained it they almost ran into a couple of Chitmarese, one of whom Somers felled with a terrific blow between the eyes; but the second Pathan raised his rifle and fired at the fleeting figure in the wake of the Irishman and his precious burden.

Mike, with the wit of a wild creature, took an initial direction the opposite of that which he intended to pursue. For a moment he stood still, and then turned in his tracks and made for the river ; and it was almost more by luck than judgement that Somers was able to keep on his heels.

How they stumbled down to the edge of the stream the two Cottonshires never could tell, but they took the water two hundred yards above the fort, hoping that the current would swirl them ashore somewhere near the spot from which they had commenced the venture.

Encumbered as he was, this second crossing was doubly strenuous for Maloney, even though Somers rendered all the assistance that was possible. But their star was in the ascendant, and with a dry sob of relief Somers at last flung one arm around a jutting rock and lent the other to assist Maloney and his charge out of the water, and then struggled after them. They blundered on in the darkness towards the wall, praying that nothing would now happen to prevent them putting the seal upon their desperate venture.

Meanwhile the garrison was puzzled at the shots over the water, seconded presently by a hail of lead upon the fort from the sangars. Colonel Whitcombe and Captain Kilmaine stood on the rear wall looking unavailingly across the black gorge.

Captain Kilmaine suddenly gasped. His hand had dropped upon a rope coiled around a coping-stone.

' Treachery ! ' suggested the colonel hoarsely.

But into Kilmaine's mind shot the belief that the rope had some connexion with the disappearance of his two men.

While he tried to pierce the black depths below a whistle reached their ears.

'By all that is wonderful it is Mike!' jerked out the captain; and then he replied with the call-notes known to every Ballycrea boy. He darted away to summon half a dozen Sikhs to the spot.

'I've spoken to him,' announced the colonel upon the captain's return. 'Haul up!'

A dozen swarthy hands laid hold of the rope, and foot by foot they pulled upon the dead weight. They dared exhibit no light except on their own side of the wall, lest they offered a mark to a sharpshooter across the gorge.

It was Mike Maloney who stood in the loop of the rope, which he had twisted around himself and the burden hugged to his breast.

Colonel Whitcombe pushed a lantern into the Irishman's face.

'Private Maloney, sor,' announced the soldier. 'Absent widdout lave, and the same for Corporal Somers, sor, waitin' at the bottom av the wall. Miss Dollie's our excuse, sor.'

'I'll overlook it, Corporal Maloney,' exclaimed the colonel joyously, entering into the Irishman's grim humour. 'Sergeant Somers is also forgiven,' he added, turning to see that there was no delay in lowering the rope.

'Thank ye, sor,' replied Mike, but with his hungry eyes bent upon Captain Kilmaine. 'Arrah, squoire—capt'in, Oi mane—will ye forgive the bad egg av Ballycrea?'

The officer with a gulp shot out a hand.

'Mike,' he said, 'the hero of the 19th needs forgiveness from nobody.'

At that moment Somers appeared, to receive a greeting that warmed his heart even more than Maloney's

had they but known it. Maloney had only himself to thank for his tribulation, whereas Sergeant Somers——

And as the dawn came with a single step over the eastward levels, the crack of rifles told that the Chitmarese rebels were commencing another day's deadly work.

XXV

A FRECKLED MERCURY

DRAYCOTT had been busy, and not altogether engaged in a labour of love. In one corner of the room was a box of books, awaiting the lid to be nailed on ; close at hand was a bundle of athletic tools—a bag of golf clubs, to which were tied a couple of cricket-bats, hockey-stick, and tennis-racquets ; and underneath the table was a kit-bag, crammed to bursting, strapped and duly labelled.

The captain of Bramleigh edged his chair nearer to the fire, raised his feet on to the ledge above the grate, and gave himself up to thought.

‘Come in,’ he cried presently, looking over his shoulder to ascertain his visitor, and then adding, ‘I’m glad it’s you, Som. It’ll be good to have a crack with you on my last night.’

‘Just what I thought,’ said Somerset, throwing himself into an easy chair and sprawling his long legs into the fender. ‘School life is one succession of breaks, but yours has come so unexpectedly that I can scarcely realize it.’

‘Only twenty-four hours’ notice is a bit thick,’ admitted Draycott. ‘I had expected to remain until the end of term, but with this sudden illness of the guv’nor’s I’ve got to commence the commercial grind fully six months earlier than I anticipated.’

Draycott had succeeded Barwell as skipper of Bramleigh, and had proved a worthy successor, even if in

some respects he did not possess the administrative capacity of the late captain.

Somerset and Draycott had always been good friends, at first with advantage to the older of the twain, but later to the benefit of the younger. When Barwell handed over the reins of office to Draycott, Boyd had not left Bramleigh, it having been decided that his transference to Hillchester should be postponed a term.

With the disappearance of Barwell and Carrington from Bramleigh it was not unlikely that Boyd would endeavour in some way to rake up the trouble concerning Wilton Somerset : and therefore, with the consent of Jack, Barwell confided to Draycott full details concerning the downfall of the one lieutenant and the narrow escape of the other, so that if necessity arose Draycott would be enabled to scotch any offensive measures which Boyd might concert.

Thus Draycott's more intimate knowledge of family matters concerning the Somersets had drawn the captains of the Fifth and Sixth even closer than ordinarily would have been the case.

The story of Wilton Somerset and his determination to serve his country in his own selected groove had made a deep impression on Draycott, and he rejoiced with Jack over some of the news from Dichfield, as if the writer had been his own brother.

The same letter that had announced the elevation of Private Somers to corporal had also notified his almost immediate departure with a draft of Cottonshires for India. Jack had desired to see his brother before he set sail from Southampton, but a preliminary examination in connexion with the boy's candidature for a Whitworth Scholarship forbade it

For half an hour the two sat, not always talking, but often with those companionable gaps of silence that betoken thorough understanding.

A smart rat-tat at Berry's door notified the postman's last delivery, and presently a letter came up for Draycott.

'From Hillchester,' he said, noting the monogram on the back of the envelope as he opened it. 'Myddleton will have to answer it.'

He read the contents with puckered lips, and then looked across at Somerset.

'Not what I supposed,' he remarked. 'Nothing to do with school matters. Gray merely sends an item of news likely to interest us. What do you think? Boyd—has—been—sent—down!'

Draycott skimmed the letter afresh, and passed it to Somerset.

'Gambling has told its sorry tale with Boyd,' said Draycott after a pause. 'It might have happened to me at Bramleigh but for you, Som. If ever one chap did another a good turn, you did it for me in making me swear off gambling.'

Somerset was replacing the letter in the envelope while he answered, 'I'm sorry for Boyd. Perhaps a chap can't help a bad disposition any more than being afflicted with red hair or a squint. Anyhow, it's a miserable handicap that cheats him out of half the spice of life.'

'And is that all you've got to say about Gray's news?' asked Draycott, with brows uplifted. 'If I were in your place I should sing with the psalmist of old, 'Mine enemies are turned back; they shall fall and perish.' Goodness, man, I'd be on the table dancing a hornpipe and breaking furniture!'

Somerset shook his head slowly, and whispered :

‘ I could quote Somebody more reliable than David—
“ Forgive, and ye shall be forgiven ! ” ’

And Draycott's flippancy died a violent and sudden death in the presence of this young Sir Galahad.

Really the captain rather welcomed a rather timid knock at the door, which opened to admit one of the Thirds, a prominent member of a new generation of Fags.

He had a mop of light hair crowning a piquant little face into which a handful of freckles appeared to have been thrown haphazard. He had been one of Draycott's staunchest worshippers ever since the skipper one day fished him out of the river at the last gasp after the capsizing of a skiff.

‘ Evening, Draycott,’ said young Maunder diffidently.

‘ Hallo, Freckles!’ greeted the captain. ‘ I'm awfully busy, but I can give you three minutes.’

‘ You remember me telling you about my Uncle Maunder being locked up in Chitmar fort,’ commenced the Fag. ‘ Well, he's had the most horrid time with that beastly old Senaputti. I've just had a letter and an Indian newspaper from my mother. I thought you would like to read it, and it'll not take you long.’

Draycott was not wildly interested in the welfare of Maunder, the Political Agent at Chitmar, and he proposed only to skim through the column and a half marked out with blue pencil. But something caught his eye, and he read every word from beginning to end, while Somerset chatted with the Third concerning current politics at Denstone's.

When Draycott had made an end of the perusal, he retained the paper, and said to Maunder :

‘ Sonny, you trip off for half an hour. Leave the

paper. I want Somerset to read it. It's most interesting.'

The moment the Fag with a pleased nod had skipped out of the room the captain turned to his companion and held out the paper.

'Som, read it, and do your heart good. No wonder you've been waiting for a letter from India—and likely to wait, thanks to that beastly old Senaputti,' Draycott concluded, mimicking young Maunder's expression.

In some miraculous manner a native runner from Chitmar fort had carried dispatches to Gilgit giving particulars of the Pathan investment, and setting forth at large the capture of little Dollie Maunder and the manner of her rescue.

Somerset read the descriptive account with glowing eyes and tremulous lips. It stirred him to the core. It filled him with passionate exultation to think that the despised of the Blanks had proved the hero of the Cottonshires.

'Sergeant too, do you twig it?' asked Draycott. 'And Mike, whom we've often laughed about, a corporal for the third time. Pity they couldn't have pinched the Senaputti while they were about it, and brought in his head on a charger.'

Somerset's gaze was bent on the leaping flames in the grate. He looked up, and his words disclosed his thoughts.

'Quixote has tilted a third sail into smithereens—lance, corporal, sergeant.'

'He's a real barger,' assented Draycott. 'He'll bunt the whole caboodle over before he has finished. Here's our newsboy coming,' he added as flying feet came up the stairs and along the passage to come to a halt at the door.

'Come in, you freckled Mercury,' called out Draycott before he could knock.

Maunder did not know the meaning of his new name ; but, judging by the seniors' faces, it was nothing uncomplimentary.

'I hope you'll not be thinking me a nuisance,' said the Fag, 'but I thought——'

'You're as welcome as the flowers in spring,' interrupted the captain gaily. 'Open that cupboard and lug out a bottle of lime-juice, a syphon, and three tumblers. You're just in time to share in a little ceremony, which methinks this auspicious evening demands.'

The Fag darted to obey the bidding, assuming that the reference was to Draycott's withdrawal from Bramleigh on the morrow.

The captain poured out cordial into the glasses, fizzed into each a quantum of soda-water, and proceeded to give a toast other than the one expected by Maunder.

'Here's to the jolly good health of Sergeant Somers and his pal Maloney,' exclaimed Draycott. 'I've never seen the sergeant, but he's one of the best, and I hope to meet him some day.'

'They're a jolly fine couple,' affirmed the Fag. 'Mother is trying to obtain their photographs for my scrap-book, to go alongside Dollie Maunder's.'

Although Somerset did not say so, he knew where there was a photograph of the sergeant ; but it could not be spared even for young Maunder's very laudable purpose.

Draycott bade good-bye to Bramleigh on the morrow, and Myddleton ruled in his stead, but only for a season. The end of the term was at hand, and all the

present Sixths would scatter to the four points of the compass. When the general move-up took place Jack Somerset would be captain of Bramleigh ; even the preparatory school would revolt if anybody else were nominated for the honour.

All at once Somerset appeared to have sloughed the air of gloom and detachment that had so long enveloped him. He was more the happy fellow of the Fourth on the morning of his ' Demoiselle ' flight than he had been during many a succeeding weary month.

He would, indeed, have been quite the ' Other ' Somerset but that there hung in the balance the fate of Chitmar fort, where dear old Quixote was fighting, not only in Empire's cause, but working out his vow to climb up the promotion rings until he had regained the position from which unkind fate had ousted him.

Chitmar fort had suddenly blazed its way into the public eye. The lonely outpost of Empire was a standing feature in the foreign and colonial news. Every morning Somerset contrived to be first to get a glance at the newspapers, but never could he extract from the brief paragraphs anything except the barest comfort. Never was there any definite news, good or bad ; nothing but surmise that all was well, and conjecture is but a poor prop for hope, which is the god of the miserable to keep the soul from sinking in despair.

On a wall in his room Somerset had fixed up the biggest map of Kafirstan that he could obtain. In the dot that represented Gilgit was stuck a tiny flag, and another marked Chitmar fort ; but where in between toiled the relief force, or whether there remained anything to relieve, none could tell—the desolate solitudes refused to breathe the secret. By this time

it might be that Brigadier Escott's column was not even in existence. Pathan devilry might have wiped it out among Nature's forbidding fastnesses ; it might have become only one more red smudge in the bloodstained records of the Brightest Jewel in the British Crown.

One morning rumour shattered the silence and plunged fond hope into cold despair. A British punitive force, returning from the Swat River, had captured a fanatical mullah, who with fiendish glee told that the Feringhees of Chitmar were no more.

Sleep was banished from Jack Somerset's pillow that night. All through the dark hours his mind was conjuring up the last scenes, when the worn-out defenders were swept out of existence in a maelstrom of Pathan lust for slaughter.

Even while Somerset tossed from side to side the wonder-working wire was at work flashing to the ends of the earth the glad news that rumour lied.

Joy cometh in the morning !

XXVI

THE RELIEF COLUMN

BRIGADIER ESCOTT, at the head of the Chitmar relief force, gauged the task before him with the discernment born of long experience of the dusky hillmen, who ever fret and fume against the yoke of the hated Feringhee.

The very nature of the country to be traversed forbade all hope of rapid progress. It was a vast world of almost unbroken sterility, made up for the most part of bare plains, gashed with nullahs and ravines along which now raged torrents from the melting snows; and everywhere were mazes of hills, most of them with brown and naked flanks that gave on to mountain-sides, some forested, many of them still snowclad, and all beyond were white peaks that towered up into the clouds.

Nowhere was there any real semblance of a road, save where some previous expedition had constructed a rude bridge over a gorge or hewed a pathway out of the side of a mountain cliff. But these few ameliorations had been partially or wholly destroyed by the tribesmen in order to hamper and delay the assistance that they knew the Sirkar would dispatch to meet Chitmar's sore need.

In military parlance the relief force was termed a flying column, but no greater misnomer could be imagined if speed were expected to form one of its attributes. It consisted of four hundred Pioneers, officered chiefly by subalterns under Colonel Warden, one hundred Kashmir infantry, half as many Kashmir sappers,

and a couple of mountain guns. To these were added about a hundred Hunza and Punyal levies, chiefly employed in carrying the ambulance doolies or to act as fodder-cutters. Altogether the column was a jumbled procession of men and mules with indispensable baggage piled up on their backs or stowed in transport carts, whose wheels had an unhappy knack of coming off, particularly during the crossing of the boulder-filled beds of mountain torrents.

The brigadier knew that any attempted undue haste or failure to neglect a single precaution might easily add to the long tally of tragedies that were the milestones in the blood-red history of Kafiristan. He was quite aware that every yard of his progress was jealously watched by the cruel eyes of Pathan spies, who sent the information ahead into the still more pitiless solitudes that lay in front of him.

Slowly but surely the relief force pushed on towards its long-suffering objective. It passed beyond the territory of the last tribe that might be accounted passably loyal, and entered the region through which the blaze of insurrection had burned its devastating way, fanned by fanatical fakirs and aspiring mullahs, who foretold to credulous ears the approaching doom of the Feringhee.

Forthwith the wings of the flying force were further clipped, since not only did the physical difficulties of the route increase in geometric progression, but from behind the safe shelter of commanding crags ever came the crack of the sniper's rifle that often put a unit off the active list, although for a time the serious casualties were restricted to the levies.

The spring thaw being in full swing, the flooded nullahs and ravines often necessitated weary mil

being traversed to find a ford where the troops could wade across in parties of a dozen or more, holding hands in order to prevent them being swept off their feet. In some cases it was almost a mystery how the baggage was got over, and not infrequently a portion failed to reach the opposite bank.

Onward and onward toiled the relief force, which more than once had to engage in hot skirmishes with bodies of tribesmen who sought to ambush them. The work of the reconnoitring parties increased in danger, for now always was there the possibility of surprise, always the fear that a Pathan force might suddenly rise up from nowhere and slash and stab its way into the midst of the brigadier's comparatively little force.

With half the distance accomplished, Escott knew that the contour of the succeeding country would permit of a spurt in progress until they reached the worst nullah in the whole route. It was a deep cañon of varying width that extended either way into practically impenetrable regions. In summer it was passable at two points, both of them mere goat tracks that zigzagged down the almost perpendicular sides of the nullah. But now the brigadier judged rightly that the fissure would be flooded to half its depth, and the only means of crossing would be by means of a wooden bridge which his sappers might throw across it.

In the middle of the narrowest section of the nullah there was an upstanding ridge that formed a natural pier and a capital support for beams, if they had happened to form any part of the equipment of the column. But as this was not the case, it was necessary to obtain timber from a belt of trees on a mountain slope two miles away.

The sapper and levies cut down trees and constructed

rough sleds on which to haul them to the required spot, and forthwith the bridge began to assume shape. By evening so much progress had been made that it was calculated the force would be over the nullah by the middle of the next day. It was not to be. In the night the torrent was swelled by a great burst of water from the mountains, and the work of toilsome hours was swept away.

Morning light not only revealed the disappearance of the partially constructed bridge, but also showed the enemy on the other side entrenched in natural positions that forbade any further attempt to bridge the nullah.

Two courses were open to Escott. Either the column would have to retrace its steps for miles in order to make a detour, or it would have to swing to the left, ascend a mountain spur, and cross a plateau to a valley that would eventually lead to open country, from which Chitmar could be approached without any special difficulty, except such as the Pathans would assuredly provide.

The brigadier weighed his chances, and came to a prompt decision. The route was changed, and the column commenced to trail up the ascending grade.

Toilsome work it was from the commencement, but it was a veritable purgatory after attaining the snowline, for the column churned the snow into a greasy slime that made the going exceedingly treacherous. It seemed almost impossible for the transport carts ever to reach the plateau, but eventually it was accomplished at the end of the second day, and twenty-four hours later the labouring strings of mules brought up the guns.

The crossing of the plateau, where the men struggled along waist-deep in snow, which had commenced to

fall afresh, could not be contrived faster than at the rate of a mile per hour. The baggage animals sank up to their girths at every step; while the guns, wheels, carriages, and ammunition were divided among different squads, four men carrying an allotted load a distance of fifty yards only, when they were relieved by another quartette. And all the while there was a wind that cut and flayed the faces of the perspiring Empire-builders.

Fortunately there was no scarcity of wood, and thus at each night halt the camp was well supplied with blazing fires, round which the exhausted men lay huddled until morning light announced a new day's toil in waiting. Not until the end of another week did the column strike a pass, ten miles in length, which led to a steep and narrow ravine that was the first section on the downward journey to the greatly desired open country into which the force trailed wearily.

After a two days' complete rest the troops fell in at 6 a.m. in the morning anxious to take the road again. When the coolies began to load up, it was discovered that twoscore of them had levanted during the night. The officers ground their teeth, for without the coolies some of the supplies would have to be left behind. During the travail through the snow the baggage had been cut down to vanishing point, but it would be impossible for the force to proceed on the food carried only in their haversacks.

Lieutenant Boyd, with a handful of the Kashmir infantry, was sent in pursuit of the absconding coolies, and at midday succeeded in tracking them into a cave in a ravine, out of which they were dragged and brought back to camp.

The next day the march was resumed in real earnest,

and, invigorated by its rest, the force made astonishing progress, for the Chitmarese had never expected the Feringhees could succeed in their attempt to cross the plateau, and for miles the country held not even a sniper

But when only ten miles from Chitmar the tribesmen were in full evidence, and slower and slower progress was made only by routing the enemy out of a succession of sangars always well situated to impede Escott's advance. More than once it was touch and go, with the prospect of the brigadier being brought to a halt and himself in need of relief.

The relief column slogged on its weary way until one evening it came to its last night's rest before being in actual touch with the Pathan force which had invested Chitmar with all the relentless pertinacity of which inborn hatred and religious fanaticism are capable.

The fates, however, forbade a rest. With the darkness there stole into the camp a friendly native with the alarming news that Colonel Whitcombe could not hold out another twenty-four hours. The Pathans, with fiendish ferocity, were mining their way underneath the fort, and at any moment after midday they might attain their end, and explode the mine to shatter the tower and leave the defenders at the mercy of the Senaputti's horde.

Forthwith camp was struck, and the relief force embarked on a night march, guided by the native of whose fealty they were assured. This last desperate resource of desperate men had not been foreseen by the tribesmen, and when dawn came with topaz glow they realized that they were between two fires, not that the one in front of them was of much account.

The Senaputti promptly faced about one half of his

force with his two guns to do battle with the brigadier while the other rained lead on the defenders of the fort with greater virulence than ever.

And down below they were mining with devilish energy, careless whether they blew themselves into any of Mahomet's seven heavens in wrecking the fort in sight of those who had dared all and suffered all in order to be in time to save it.

Brigadier Escott speedily got his two guns at work shelling the warren of sangars, to which the artillery of the Senaputti made poor reply ; shortly no reply at all, for the murderous fire of the Pioneers and the Kashmir infantry made it impossible to serve the guns, which were hurried back to shell the fort afresh.

The line after line of sangars were defended by the Chitmarese with untold ferocity ; but the Pioneers never wavered in their grim task, ably seconded by their Kashmir allies. Gradually they won their way, yard by yard, until there remained only the principal sangar nearest the fort ; and just before noon even this was being hotly assailed.

The question in the mind of Escott was whether they would be able to prevent the firing of the mine. The answer was given at two o'clock, when there was a dull boom, a shattering crack, and a portion of the tower and a section of the adjoining wall tottered into ruins.

The explosion only partly effected the anticipated ruin, but, nevertheless, would have been sufficient to leave the fort at the mercy of the besiegers had not the relief force been at hand to check the fell purpose.

The Pathans, baulked in their prime object, then turned their attention solely to the relief force, which could only reach the fort by crossing a zone that was subject to a withering fire.

Yet Escott dared not delay the crossing, for in the meantime a mere handful of the tribesmen might storm the broken wall and massacre Whitcombe's decimated force to a man. Shortly the Senaputti detached a body of the tribesmen to put that murderous plan into execution, and the Pioneers set out to race them for it.

With British cheers commenced the final rush across that death-swept space, which was the culmination to a series of heroic movements such as ever mark the work of the 'Boundary Shifter' amid the everlasting hills.

At two-thirds of the distance nearly half of the Pioneers were down, while the few remaining sub-alterns urged the broken ranks to persevere in the desperate task.

Lieutenant Boyd from the commencement of the action appeared to bear a charmed life. On and on he now plunged straight ahead until, when only a hundred yards from the wall, he pitched forward with a bullet in his side. He endeavoured to regain his feet, but another shot took him in the ankle, and down he crashed a second time. A sergeant attempted to raise him to his feet, but was shot through the head, and fell by the side of the wounded officer.

The spot where Boyd lay was in the direct course of the Pathan wall party, which insensately hacked to death every wounded Feringhee encountered in its path.

Boyd's approaching fate was patent to the strained eyes at the top of the broken wall. Suddenly from the breach there emerged a tatterdemalion figure with a bloodstained bandage round his forehead. Down the heaped-up ruin of stones he stumbled. Clearing the

obstruction. he ran with shaky steps in the face of imminent death to the prostrate Boyd, whom he seized in his arms, slung across his shoulder, and then turned to regain the fort by the way he came.

It was an act of magnificent madness that could only be foredoomed to failure ; it could result in nothing less than the sacrifice of two lives instead of one. The rescuer stood not a hundred to one chance ; but when did Tommy Atkins ever study odds, for or against, when hot work is afoot ?

But Fortune, the fickle jade, smiled instead of frowned upon him. She galvanized his half-starved frame, strengthened his tottering limbs, heartened his heroic spirit, and protected him from the shower of bullets that spat viciously around him.

He struggled up the broken wall. Once he nearly lost his precarious footing. In that fearful climb, hampered by the dead weight of his burden, the muscles of his arms and shoulders seemed as though they would burst ; his legs tottered under him ; even his sight seemed failing ; and his breath was a series of stertorous gasps.

The hero would never have reached his goal had not Corporal Maloney and a havildar of Sikhs dared the hail of shots in order to lend their aid to their comrade, whom they grasped and drew up to the top of the wall.

And in that last moment Fortune changed her mind concerning him. A couple of Pathan bullets found their billets in the spent form of Sergeant Somers, who collapsed under the man for whom, in all probability, he had sacrificed his own life.

By that time the Pathans had recognized the hopelessness of the struggle, and broke and fled to their mountain fastnesses to sulk until the long arm of the

Sirkar dealt out punishment to the leaders of the insurrection, and put the fear of Empire into their black hearts for a season.

The investment and relief of Chitmar post was but one more grim incident in the story of Empire-building. Over the fort, ruined in part and in all a shambles, still flew the flag, under which Escott and Whitcombe shook hands with a depth of feeling that needed no form of speech. Mother Empire claims deeds of her sons, not words.

Half of Colonel Whitcombe's force had laid down their lives in defence of the fort, a quarter were in hospital, and of those actually defending the fort to the last a good proportion were injured or sick, or worn by toil and privation until they could scarcely drag one foot after the other.

The wound in Lieutenant Boyd's side, it was feared, would prove mortal ; in any case, the second shot had shattered his ankle, necessitating amputation and an end to soldiering. Of Sergeant Somers there was but little assuring to be said. A magnificent constitution had already been debilitated by the rigours of the siege, and Surgeon Berrill was shaking his head over his favourite.

'An astonishingly good fellow,' Berrill was saying to Surgeon Ransome, of the Pioneers. 'Far above the average "Tommy" in speech and manners, and a perfect demon for work. A gentleman ranker, if I ever saw one, with possibly some tragedy at the back of his beyond.'

'Escott will recommend him for the V.C., or else offer him a commission,' Ransome informed him.

'Doubtful if he'll live for either,' gloomily responded Berrill. 'I'm on my way to visit him.'

XXVII

TRUTH WILL OUT

THE hospital was a bomb-proof shelter immediately under the wall of the fort, to which had now been added a marquee to afford the extra accommodation that the last desperate stages of the fight had rendered necessary. Within lay those who had given blood and limbs in the sacred cause of Empire, some of them mere crimsoned ruins that would never return to the land of their birth, from which they had come to the East in the full pride of lusty manhood.

The two surgeons entered the main ward. The ghastly aftermath of the fight had now been sponged, anointed, bound, and strapped into all the comfort that surgical aid could contrive. Pioneer orderlies and impassive Hindu attendants moved noiselessly among their charges.

Berrill pointed to a screen, and the surgeons passed behind.

There on a camp-bed lay the silent form of Sergeant Somers. The clean white bandage on the forehead that hid a wound received earlier in the day stood out in contrast with the brick-coloured, toil-worn features that were death's counterpart.

'Is he Sergeant Somers?' asked Ransome tensely. 'A gentleman ranker and Wilton Somerset, as sure as heaven!'

He bent over the bed for a few moments and inspected the unconscious man with critical eyes. He

turned to Berrill. 'He's an old Blank-hire sub,' he whispered. 'Trouble about a forged cheque. He maintained his innocence to the last. Court-martial declared him guilty, and he had to send in his papers. Some of us always doubted whether there had not been a miscarriage of justice. The colonel in particular desired to assist Somerset in some other walk of life, but he disappeared—and now we find him. You were quite right, there was a tragedy.'

A quarter of an hour later Colonel Warden came with Ransome to the bedside. •

As the colonel viewed his former subaltern a stab of pity smote his heart.

'A soldier every inch, Ransome,' he said softly. 'He loved his profession, and even a tragedy couldn't hound him out of it. A V.C. man too. Whitcombe swears he has earned half a dozen during the last month. Are heroes and rotters of the same clay? I wonder—I wonder.'

Two days later Surgeon Berrill was distinctly hopeful concerning Somers; there was a cessation of the bleeding, and a fighting chance of snatching him from the grisly, clammy shadow overhanging him.

For Lieutenant Boyd there was no hope. Complications had ensued. In addition to the cruel work effected by a dum-dum bullet in his side, septic poisoning had followed the amputation of his foot. He was unconscious and in the throes of delirium.

Corporal Pratt, of the Pioneers, hospital orderly for the time being, sat by the bed whereon lay Lieutenant Boyd, raving of the march to Chitmar and the capture of the sangars before the fort. Presently he would gabble jumbled snatches of family matters, only to wander into regimental mess affairs at home.

Sometimes the corporal was uneasy as he heard the unbarring of a man's soul, disclosures that never in consciousness would have passed the speaker's hot lips. Pratt, indeed, was about to remove himself when a new word caught his ear, and a sudden set of the lips indicated a resolve to banish scruples.

Presently the tortured mind commenced afresh upon a new film in the delirious biograph. Fresh incidents flashed across the sufferer's mental screen—some, regimental matters of which Pratt was cognizant; others to which he had no clue.

And then came that for which the corporal waited. He listened intently. Interest, pity, anger, amazement, loathing, chased each other out of his eyes in turn as he put together the disjointed snatches, filled in the gaps, and summed up the incredible tale.

'The colonel must hear it,' muttered the soldier; and straightway he scribbled a note, marked it 'private,' and dispatched it to the colonel's quarters by a Hindu orderly.

Colonel Warden hastened to the hospital, his sharp eyes raking the corporal interrogatively.

'The lieutenant, sir, says things in his delirium that you must hear, sir,' said Pratt. 'And if it's the truth, sir, it's just awful.'

'But he's unconscious, and it may be only the merest rubbish,' protested the officer.

'It's the truth, sir,' maintained the corporal. 'It's in his mind, and it will out, sir, like murder. It's almost as bad as murder, sir. It——'

He broke off, and held up a finger in warning that the tireless iteration had reached a point from which the colonel's attention was desirable.

'Forgery—not the first you've committed, Borlock.

Here's the colonel's signature for you to copy. There's the cheque out of the mess-account cheque-book. Of course, it may ruin Somerset. Well, it's your ruin or his——'

The querulous voice broke off, paused for an instant, and then commenced to issue company commands.

Colonel Warden drew his hand down his face slowly. His eyes wandered from the corporal to the restless figure on the bed and back again.

'You've been very discreet, Pratt,' he said, 'and I can trust you to remain so. You were Lieutenant Somerset's servant, I think, when——'

'Yes, sir,' responded the corporal.

'And Sergeant Borlock acted in a similar capacity for Lieutenant Boyd?'

'Yes, sir. We were both lance-jacks at that time.'

The colonel looked at the sick man pityingly for a moment, turned on his heel, and walked thoughtfully out of the ward.

'Send Sergeant Borlock to me,' said the colonel to an orderly standing at the door of his quarters.

The sergeant shortly arrived, saluted, and stood awaiting to learn the officer's pleasure.

'What were you in civilian life before you joined the Service?' asked the colonel abruptly, taking keen stock of the sergeant's weak chin and the eyes that shifted under the gaze of his interlocutor.

'A bank clerk, sir,' was the rather wondering reply.

'Ah! I recollect. You write a remarkably good hand.'

'Yes, sir,' answered Borlock pleasedly, with visions of promotion rising before him.

'Would you care to tell me why you left the service of the bank?'

The sergeant's pleasure evaporated suddenly.

'No, sir,' he responded; and in his face pallor suddenly struggled with the tan.

'While in Lieutenant's Boyd's service you proved your knowledge of banking matters by making unwarrantable use of your master's cheque-book,' hazarded the colonel, whose eyes never left the non-com.

'Yes, sir,' acknowledged Borlock, with anxiety in his tone.

'Now you needn't incriminate yourself unless you please,' the colonel warned him. 'Did Lieutenant Boyd hold your crime over your head in pressing you to forge my name to another cheque? I may say I've learnt my information from the lieutenant's own lips.'

'Yes, sir, that was it exactly,' the sergeant agreed 'I didn't want to——'

'And you allowed an innocent man to suffer,' broke in Colonel Warden severely. 'You kept silence—— Oh!' he broke off, 'it was a dastardly thing to do. One's gorge rises at thought of it'; and with an angry gesture he dismissed the sergeant from the room.

That same night Lieutenant Boyd's condition underwent a change for the worse, and the tongue which had disclosed a pent-up secret never again would betray its helpless owner.

All through the next day and night there was no movement of Boyd's poor mutilated frame; and then as the distant eastward peaks were set aglow by the new-born day his soul unloosened its chain, and winged its way to realms where envy and hatred can have no place.

During the succeeding week Sergeant Somers improved by leaps and bounds. One day he woke to full consciousness to look into the face of Corporal

Pratt. He promptly closed his eyes again ; he desired to think, probably also to pinch himself under the bedclothes.

The invalid's eyelids flickered, his brows drawn together in a puzzled frown. Evidently he was digging deeply into his recollection.

Presently he opened his eyes afresh.

'Is it really you, Pratt, or are you a dream?' asked Somers, weakly wondering.

'A full-blown corporal is no dream, sir,' was the gay response.

'I've been ill, I suppose,' went on Somers, drawing his hand across his forehead. 'The wall was blown up, and—and—I can't remember.'

'Never mind, sir,' said Pratt; 'you're mending fast, and the "Old Man" says they'll have you back at the officers' mess in no time. Officers' mess, sir.'

Somers lay perfectly still, allowing the new sergeant's words to sink in during a longer pause in which memory became busy.

'I was court-martialled, and turned out of the Blankshires,' murmured Somers, 'and—and——'

'They've court-martialled you back again, sir,' Pratt informed him. 'Everything's all merry and bright, sir. The "Old Man" knows who faked that cheque, and he's "on the pegs" for it.'

Wilton Somerset again closed his eyes. He lay so still and quiet that Pratt imagined he had swooned, and was about to apply restoratives when his eyes, swimming with moisture, again opened. The lips parted and launched a question:

'Do you mean, Pratt, that I'm really back in the Blankshires, just as I was before?'

'No, I'm "dustholed" if you are,' was the reply in

soldier vernacular. 'When the "Poultice Whollopers" have done with you, you'll be put in your right place. You'll be Captain Somerset, V.C. Now go to sleep, sir,' pleaded Corporal Pratt. 'I was told not to tell you a word for fear excitement would do you harm.'

A quarter of an hour later, when Surgeon Berrill came on his round, Somerset was in a gentle sleep, Nature's soft nurse, whose tender arms would bring **still more healing.**

* * * * *

'I can understand Jack going out to meet his brother, but why should Squire Jocelyn take the trouble to accompany him?' asked Tom Barwell, who had come down from Oxford to Brookhurst for a week-end.

'A very good reason,' the rector assured him. 'Squire Jocelyn is the uncle of the two Somersets.'

The younger Barwell looked incredulous.

'I knew it almost immediately after Jack entered Bramleigh. The squire was a Fairbairn, who changed his name on succeeding to the Jocelyn estates. Twenty-five years or so ago Mollie Fairbairn was cut off by her family on account of her runaway marriage with Herman Somerset, at that time a struggling artist. She made appeals to the family to forgive her love-match, but her letters were left unanswered. She died when Jack was a baby in arms.'

'And didn't Mr. Somerset know that Squire Jocelyn was John Fairbairn?' asked Tom.

'He learnt it only a few days ago,' answered the

rector. 'It was only after he left Brookhurst that the squire accidentally discovered that the boy who had just gone up to Bramleigh was the youngest son of Mollie Fairbairn, about whom of late years he had suffered twinges of remorse. Quixotically he decided not to disclose himself, but to watch the careers of the young Somersets; and if they proved to be boys of character, they should be accorded the forgiveness which had been denied to their mother.'

'Then the Boyds and Somersets are cousins?' exclaimed Tom amazedly.

'In some way or other Mrs. Boyd learnt of the squire's intentions,' said Mr. Barwell. 'She doubtless read a memorandum written by him, and which he never meant her to see. Probably she acquainted her sons with the contents, and the attitude and actions of the Boyd boys become understandable.'

'And Gerald Boyd lies in far Kafiristan, and Maurice is off to a cattle-ranch in Argentina,' put in Tom quietly.

'The pity of it all,' said his father, 'for the Jocelyn wealth would have proved ample for the four.'

'The two Somersets deserve all they get,' averred Tom staunchly, 'and the old gentleman will be getting full value for his money.'

'He's perfectly satisfied,' said the rector. 'He went off with Jack a few days ago as happy as a sand-boy. Herman Somerset, too, is on his way to Bombay from Australia. The squire made peace with him by cable.'

* * * * *

The Blankshire and Cottonshire drafts were at

Mooltan *en route* for Bombay. Not that all who came out were returning home, for far behind them, amid the endless desolate hills, lay more than a handful of units 'who had done their work and held their peace, and had no fear to die,' victims to the fatal witchery of that torrid land for which their forbears fought and bled, and which still makes demands upon all that is best in Britain's sons.

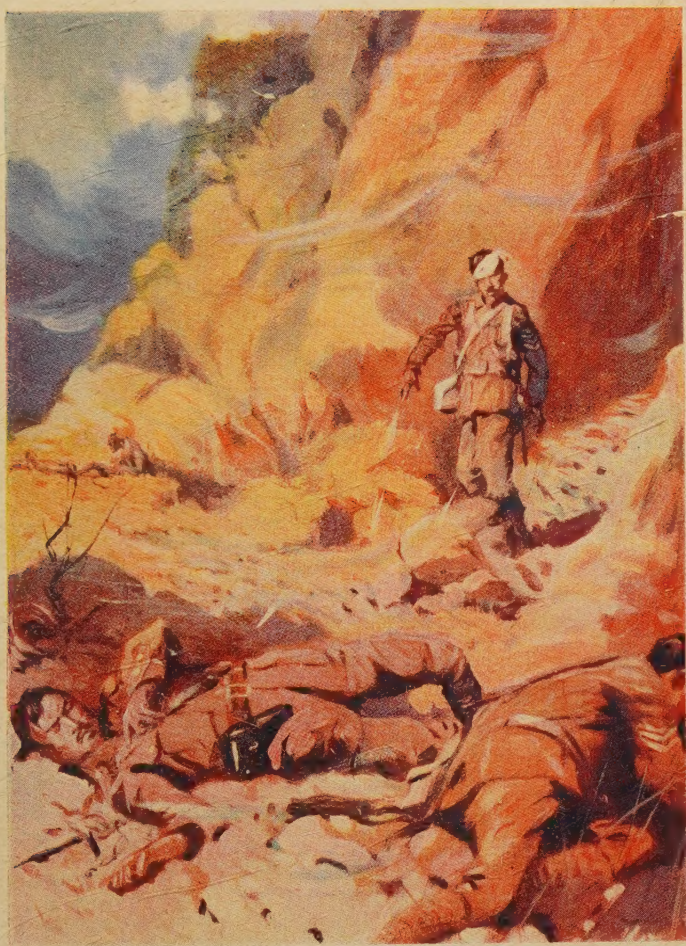
Judging from the pleased faces of the 'Tommies,' their departure from India's coral strand was proving no great wrench.

Sergeants Maloney and Pratt, immensely proud of their new stripe, had struck up a warm friendship founded on a common tie—their almost dog-like devotion to Captain Somerset. To one regret only did the couple jointly subscribe, namely, that different regiments claimed their services. In the case of Maloney he viewed the transference of Somerset to the Blankshires as a positive affliction.

'If it wasn't for lavin' Capt'in Kilmaine, Oi'd be desartin' from the Cottons an' 'listin' in the Blanks as a gintleman privit, that's my ticket, although Oi says ut.'

At Bombay a glad surprise awaited Captain Wilton Somerset, V.C. When the long troop-train steamed into the station, there on the platform stood his father and Jack, and with them an elderly gentleman, who was bending upon the soldier a gaze full of affectionate regard, only a moment later to transfer it to Jack, while he murmured to himself, 'Honours and honour—Honour against Odds.'

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"He ran with shaky steps in the face of imminent death
to the prostrate Boyd."



